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ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Make your information accessible and understandable

Information about our schools can be hard to understand. Consider the “alphabet soup” of acronyms that are part of educational vernacular. Think about the new trends in pedagogy and changes to standards that can leave people who attended school as children completely lost in this foreign environment.

To build trust and support for your district, you must communicate complex information clearly, and you must also listen. You are not simply announcing decisions and sharing information; ideally, you are facilitating conversations.

Simplifying school information

People consume an overwhelming amount of information in daily life. Many people will dismiss or overlook material that looks complicated or time-consuming. If we want to compete for attention in this noisy media environment, we need to make content that is easy to read and easy to understand.

To get attention and ensure understanding, we must use clear language and interesting imagery and provide context to show why issues matter.

Speak and write in plain English

Avoid ‘eduspeak’ jargon, acronyms and unnecessarily big words. They all create unnecessary barriers to comprehension. When you are writing for a broader audience, jargon and insider phrases slow readers down and alienate them. They make readers work harder to understand your message and can come across as arrogant or deceptive.

One way to break through the jargon and get back to plain English is to practice telling your story to someone who has no connection with education. Choose someone who is representative of the audience you hope to reach. Ask them to give you feedback about your message. What is the most important message to them? What parts are clear and easy to understand? What is confusing, overly technical, or dull? Revise your message based on this feedback.

Use readability tools to make your writing more reader-friendly

Readability describes how easy or difficult it is to understand a body of text. Readability scores are typically based on U.S. grade levels, so something written to a fourth-grade reading level will be easier to read than something written to a tenth-grade level.

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One of the biggest myths about improving readability is that it is about “dumbing down” content. The truth is that readable, accessible writing helps all levels of readers. Why make your audience work harder to get your message? The desire to improve readability is about having respect for both your reader and your content. If you think the content is important enough to write about, it is in your interest to make sure your writing is appealing and easy to read.

A good target when you are writing for the general adult population is to aim for a high school reading level — grade 10 is a good target. This is not to suggest that the average adult can only read at that level, but it is an acknowledgement that most adults are busy and want to be able to read and understand your writing quickly.

The Flesch-Kincaid tool has become one of the most popular readability tools available and it is embedded in Microsoft Word. Search “readability” in your software’s help section for instructions on how to enable this feature so that readability statistics pop up after a review with the spelling and grammar checker.

You can also test your readability levels with online tools such as www.webfx.com/tools/read-able. Simply paste text to calculate readability.

Quick tips to improve readability

If your first readability check shows your writing is at a higher grade level than you want, here are a few easy ways you can bring it down to an easier level:

Read your document aloud. Revise unnecessarily complicated words and unnatural or convoluted phrasing.

Reduce your average sentence length. This is one of the most important factors in readability scores. Your average number of words per sentence should be 15 or less. This doesn’t mean that every sentence should be short; variety is the goal for more interesting text. Start by breaking up sentences with semi-colons and conjunctions (such as “and,” “but,” and “so”).

Break up long paragraphs. Include text breaks to make content easier to read. They also make a page look easier to read, a critical consideration when busy people are deciding whether to read your material. Make sure each paragraph has only one main idea.

Write in the first person. This encourages you to write in an active voice and makes your writing more interesting. The spelling and grammar checker in MS Word can be set to show you the passive sentences in your writing. Writing in passive voice can make content feel convoluted. Good writers keep passive sentences to a minimum.

Finally, write less! Remember, most of your readers are busy, and your organization is competing for their attention. Make your writing look quick and easy to read by keeping it brief, especially if it will be read on a digital screen. The guideline is to use 50% fewer words when you are writing for a digital platform. This tip bears repeating: Content written for an electronic screen should be half as long as the same content written for print publication. Nobody has time to wade through pages of text on a small screen.

Remember who your readers are and where they are reading your words and make it easier for them.