

Hurley Write, Inc. July 2011 Newsletter

Ensuring Readability

Lots of writers never think much about readability; that is, the ease with which readers can read and understand the document and take the necessary action. So, what constitutes a truly readable document? Ask this question, and you're bound to get all kinds of answers, ranging from a readable document is one that "flows" or that is grammatically correct, or, one of my favorites: it uses short sentences (because some writers associate succinctness and conciseness with short sentences, when this is not necessarily true).

While certainly flow and grammatical correctness help ensure a readable document, what really ensures readability is a document that meets a reader's needs for information, both in the types of information that's provided and in how that information is presented. Writers can write short sentences, but that doesn't ensure that document is more readable than one that uses longer, more complex sentences and shorter sentences can, in fact, inhibit readability. What writers need to understand is reader expectations for the document and how to correctly emphasize information and, believe it or not, there are techniques correctly emphasizing and doing it well.

We may also remember that little gem from the seventh grade, the "topic sentence." Remember that? It's the sentence in the paragraph that's supposed to tell readers what the paragraph is about. And it works; unfortunately, too few writers know how to write a good one and where to put it. A good topic sentence ensures readability, as does putting that topic sentence in the appropriate place within a paragraph.

In short, readability is complex and involves more than simply grammar, punctuation, and writing short sentences. Writers need to understand what readers expect, how to emphasize appropriately, and how to create a topic sentence that's accurate and well-placed.

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Julie and her dog Alice were out jogging when they heard loud aggravated barking. They quickly ran to where the noise was coming from only to find several dogs of various shapes and sizes, large dogs with spots, small dogs with bushy tails, brown eyes, and small feet, and medium size dogs that included: Corgis and Terriers. Julie was very happy to have found the dogs until she realized that they only wanted to run free and she did not know how to unlock the gate. Sadly Julie and her dog Alice walked away.

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