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## READABILITY

Easing the way for your readers

### Abstract

This white paper defines readability and discusses strategies writers can use to make documents more readable.

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## Readability: Easing the Way for Your Readers

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Hoping to land your company a big contract, you have your team create a proposal for a prospective client. The proposal has all the information necessary to make your case, and the facts are persuasive. The proposal's technical details are correct, and it meets the requirements for word count and format. It is also perfectly grammatical, properly punctuated, and logically argued.

But you don't get the contract. In fact, you hear from an inside source that the prospective client never finished reading what you sent. Why not? It turns out that reading your proposal was like wading through quicksand. Technically correct though it was, it simply wasn't **readable**.

### What is readability?

The need to make a document readable is so obvious that there's a good chance your employees take it for granted. Like any other element of a business or technical document, however, achieving readability requires writers to engage their critical-thinking skills.

Readability is about more than using a straightforward vocabulary. Yes, a readable document is understandable, word for word. Beyond that, its sentences and paragraphs are also easy to follow. Its pages are easy to look at. Its organization is easy to navigate. Its information is presented visually in a way that's both comprehensible and memorable. There's no clutter, no fog, and no friction in a readable document. Even if the subject is complex, a reader can follow a readable document with relative ease.



To make a document readable, a writer must think critically about choices in terms of words, sentence and paragraph structure, organization, and design.

### First, consider your reader(s).

To make your company's documents readable, the first thing your team should think about is readers.

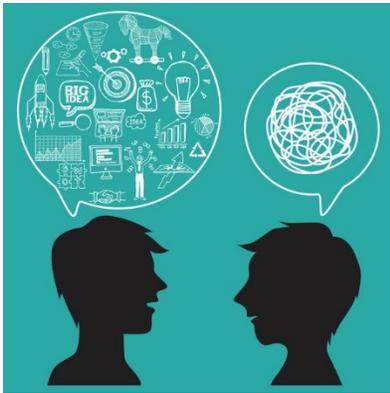
We encourage writers to start any writing process by defining the expected readers of a document. This is especially true when it comes to readability. And to consider how many and what kind of readers; for instance, is there a reader who'll be a decision-maker and one who will be tasked with completing the

action the document requires? You'll need to consider both and come up with strategies to ensure that they get the information they need from the document.

Your readers will determine, most importantly, **the technical level** of the documents, but will also speak to how you organize the document and how you structure your sentences and paragraphs. Consider this sentence:

**“We must examine the spectrum of *Plasmodium falciparum* transmission intensities.”**

A medical researcher who writes a journal article for malaria specialists can assume her reader will understand that sentence. But if you're writing a pamphlet for tourists encouraging them to use mosquito nets when they travel in Africa, such a sentence is going to land on them like a sack of cement.



Consider the technical sophistication of your audience even when choosing how to present information visually. Certain kinds of graphs, diagrams, and illustrations, for example, may be difficult for some readers to interpret.

**Apply the basic principles of readability.**

Readers of all levels of sophistication appreciate a document that applies the basic principles of readability. If you want a document to be a smooth road for your readers, and not an obstacle course, have your employees try these suggestions in their writing:

**When in doubt, use shorter words and shorter paragraphs—but don't overdo it.** In general, shorter elements are easier to follow and their ideas easier to retain. Strings of long sentences that contain lots of qualifying clauses and five-syllable words can be insurmountable for some readers. In fact, word-processing programs like Microsoft Word define “readability” almost entirely in terms of sentence and word length: the longer the sentences and words, the less readable (supposedly) the document.

Don't take this advice too far, however. Was that 32-word sentence two sentences ago too long? Not if you could read it once and understand it (that's the best way to gage if a sentence is too long: can you read it once and understand it). Good writers vary the length of their sentences, and a plainly structured long sentence can convey your intelligence and control of ideas while remaining perfectly readable. Besides, too many seven-word sentences and one-syllable words can make your prose sound juvenile. You don't want to sound like a fourth grader—unless you're writing for an audience of fourth graders!

**Use plain, not “fancy” language.** Don’t say “perambulate” if you can say “walk.” Don’t say “utilize” if you can say “use.” Avoid jargon and unusual acronyms: “Let’s revisit that issue later to align our end-state B2B visions” is a muddled way to say, “Let’s meet later to make sure we have the same goals for new business.” Plain language is also often more concise than fancy language, and conciseness also contributes to readability.

**For a longer document, consider beginning with an executive summary.** Such a brief overview at the beginning of a document can help your readers see the point of both the whole and each part of your document. A good summary serves as a useful map for your readers.

**Make hard facts the heart of your document.** “Hard” facts are objective and precise. “Soft” facts are foggy. Here’s a soft fact: “Our company has experienced great financial success recently.” Here’s the hard-fact version: “Our company netted \$200,000 in the fourth quarter of 2015.” We estimate that at least 75 percent of good business writing consists of hard facts, which release your readers from the fog.

**Use visual elements to convey information that’s too difficult or too dense to explain in words.** To show the pricing for different services your company provides, for example, a simple **table** might work best. Your company’s financial progress over the last 10 years might best be displayed in a **graph**, and a change in your corporate structure might best be explained in an organizational **chart**. Likewise, you might want to use **photographs** or **illustrations** to accompany the instructions for assembling your company’s products. In each of these cases, you’ll be presenting information in a way that is not just easier to comprehend, but more persuasive and memorable.

**Follow generalities with specific examples, and follow abstract statements with concrete illustrations.**

**General:** “Some of our factory’s machines are out of date.”

**Specific:** “Our bottling machine is 15 years old, our capping machine is 12 years old, and our labeling machine dates to 1994.”

**Abstract:** “His work space is messy and dangerous.”

**Concrete:** “In his office, five electric cords are coming from one socket, coffee cups are dripping on the filing cabinet, and a soft drink has spilled on the floor just inside the door.”

Not only do specific and concrete words bring ideas into focus for your reader (and thereby make them more understandable and memorable), they also provide evidence to support your claims. (You may have noticed that in the document you’re now reading, nearly every piece of

our advice comes with specific examples.)

On the other hand, general and abstract statements can also serve a readability purpose: they help readers anticipate the information to come and thereby understand it more quickly. Remember good old **topic sentences** from your school days? They still work—because they are usually the general or abstract statements that prepare readers for the specific details of the paragraph to come.

**Make your pages easy on the eyes.** Who wants to read a page that is a thick gray slab of nothing but type? White space—the area on the page with no ink—can help. You can add white space by breaking long paragraphs into shorter ones, increasing the size of margins, adding spaces between lines where appropriate, and inserting headings and subheadings to separate long sections of the document.

Another way to make your document easier to look at is to optimize line lengths. [Studies](#) show that lines that are about 65 characters long are easiest to read. Lines that are much shorter or much longer than that can be difficult to navigate. And using a flush right margin can make your writing a nightmare to read; jagged right is best.



You can also make your document more visually appealing by using other kinds of visual elements: graphs, illustrations, diagrams, and charts; bulleted and numbered lists; larger and easier-to-read type; colors, boxes, and symbols.

Readers appreciate thoughtful document design, whether they're aware of it or not, and they will think well of you for providing it.

**Have clear, frequent transitions.** These are words and phrases that lead your reader from one idea to the next. You can think of transitions as bridges that connect the ideas in a document. Some examples are “however,” “likewise,” “in addition,” “for example,” “furthermore,” “on the other hand,” “in other words.”

It's possible to overuse transitional words and phrases, becoming heavy-handed with them. When in doubt, however, provide a sensible transition to help the reader get from here to there.

**Organize clearly and logically.** Certain kinds of reports and proposals have a long-established organizational structure. In general, your readers will find these easiest to read if you follow the traditional formats. Reports, for example, usually follow the following organization: introduction, method and sources of research, facts, discussion, conclusions, recommendations.

Most of your reports should follow something like this organization.

For less traditional kinds of documents, encourage your team to try to make the organization as clear as possible. An executive summary, as mentioned, can help by laying out the overall organization for the reader at the start, and consistent headings that reflect the major elements of the organization can act as signposts to help readers anticipate ideas and navigate their way through longer documents. Most importantly, follow a clear, logical path to your conclusions.

Our philosophy is that anyone can learn to write readable documents using these and other principles. In the end, readability is all about **taking the time to consider your readers and the action you want your reader to take**. That may require a little extra thought and effort, but the payoff is huge: your team will spend less time writing and will, in the end, write more readable documents.

Do you need help analyzing your teams' writing process? Or are you interested in improving your teams' writing skills? We offer customized onsite and online business, technical, and scientific writing course. [Contact us](#) today!

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