



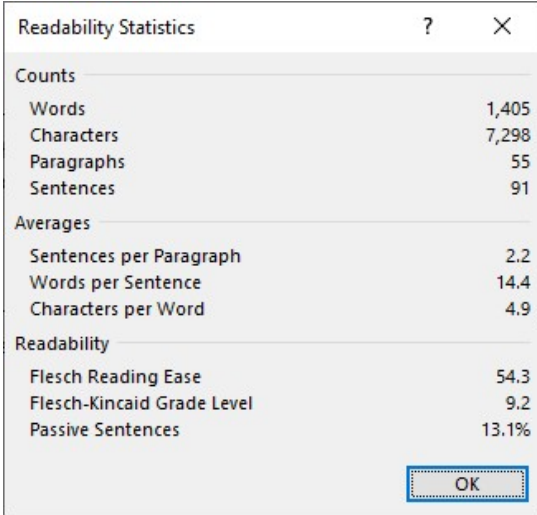
Readability Tests: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

What are readability tests?

- Simple measures of a text's readability
- Based on mathematical formulas
- These tests consider a few features of text, most often word length and sentence length
- In general, readability formulas assume that:
 - Longer words are harder than shorter words
 - Longer sentences are harder than shorter sentences

What readability tests are available?

- Dozens of readability tests have been developed
 - E.g., SMOG, Fry Method, Gunning Fog, Dale-Chall Formula, Coleman-Liau Index
- Two are built into MS Word:
 - **Flesch Reading Ease test:** Rates the readability of your text on a 100-point scale, with higher scores being easier to read
 - **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test:** Rates the readability of text based on U.S. school grade levels
- Different tests use different readability formulas
 - The scores for the same text can differ by several grade levels, depending on which formula is used



Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	1,405
Characters	7,298
Paragraphs	55
Sentences	91
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	2.2
Words per Sentence	14.4
Characters per Word	4.9
Readability	
Flesch Reading Ease	54.3
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	9.2
Passive Sentences	13.1%

What can a readability test do for you?

It's important to remember that the utility of readability tests is limited. They can:

- Alert you that the text may be too difficult
- Signal the need to make revisions
- Help keep language simple
- Catch silly mistakes and correct poor grammar
- Provide “quick and dirty” proofreading

What CAN'T a readability test tell you?

- Whether a text is appropriate or effective for a given audience
- Whether certain words are familiar to your audience
- Whether sentences are clear and cohesive
- Whether the context is organized in a logical way (e.g., with key messages near the beginning)
- Whether the text is scannable and will hold a reader's attention
- Whether there are pictures, tables, or charts to help users understand content

What are other potential downsides?

- Readability formulas are easy to over-interpret
- Grade-level designations can be difficult to interpret for adults, and there is no single best grade level for content
- Testing can be time-intensive work: Text often has to be formatted/prepared for the test, sometimes multiple tests are recommended, and tests may need to be scored by hand
- It's tempting to write to a target grade level instead of considering all the factors that make content understandable

What do experts recommend?

- Use readability formulas only as tools for occasional limited use— not as ways to measure overall suitability of documents
- Pick your readability formula and method carefully (the CMS Toolkit recommends scoring written material by hand using the Fry Method or the SMOG)
- Interpret a score from a readability formula as indicating a general range of difficulty rather than a specific grade level
- Report scores from readability formulas in ways that acknowledge the narrow scope and limitations of readability formulas
- Feedback from intended readers is the ultimate test of whether your text is effective

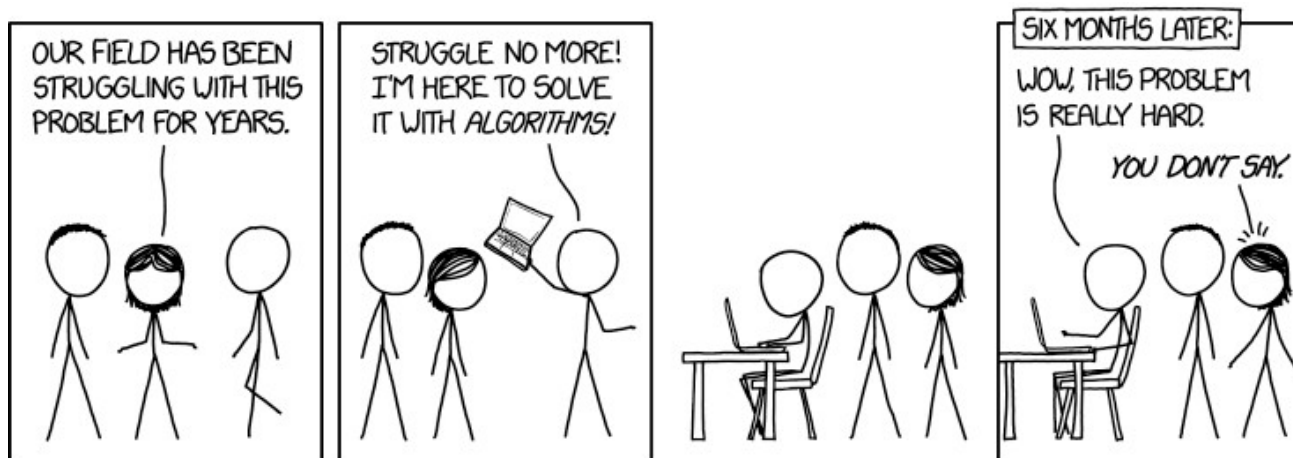
Source: [CMS Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective](#)

The bottom line

Keeping individual words and sentences easy enough for your readers is **necessary but not sufficient** for ensuring that they can understand and use the material.

Treat readability formulas as **only one tool among many** that can help you see ways to make materials easy for people to understand and use.

[CMS Toolkit](#)



XKCD

Other ways to check & improve readability

- Gold standard: Test your content with target readers
 - Define the intended audience
 - Perform user research
 - Develop personas
 - At the very least, have someone isn't familiar with the content read it
- Follow guidelines for clear writing
 - See resources on Slide 11
- Don't forget about accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and how people read online vs. print materials

Readability Resources

- CMS Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective
 - [Toolkit Part 7: Using Readability Formulas](#)
- AHRQ Tips on Writing a Quality Report
 - [Tip 6: Use Caution With Readability Formulas for Quality Reports](#)
- CDC Clear Communication Index
 - [CCI User Guide](#)
- plainlanguage.gov
 - [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#)
- HHS/ODPHP: Health Literacy Online
 - [Health Literacy Online Strategies Checklist](#)