

Writing in Plain English

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TESTING

The only sure way to know whether documents are easy to read and plain for their intended audience is to use a program of testing. You need feedback in order to discover whether the terms you have chosen are familiar or not, and whether certain grammatical structures are more readily understood than others. The language used by audiences is constantly changing. The attributes of these audiences vary according to education and social background.

Testing gives you first-hand information on whether you are writing acceptably for your audience and whether your documents are functioning efficiently. It shows you:

- what should be in your document
- how you should arrange your material.

The extent of testing

Testing need not be a huge task. With some documents it may take only one or two days. A lot depends on the diversity of the audience, the nature of the document, the extent of its distribution and the administrative procedures involved in using it.

When to test

You do not have to wait until a document is complete before you test it. Testing can and should be done at all stages - when the document is being planned, after each draft and after it has been used for some time. If an earlier version has already been in use, the inquiries made about it and the errors made in connection with it can indicate some of the problems that should be looked at in

testing. You should make sure that testing of any new version removes past difficulties

How to test

There are several ways of testing.

Ask an individual

You can ask a member of your audience for his or her views on what you propose to write. These views will be valuable, but they are only the views of one person and may not be typical of your entire potential audience. You should take them only as a rough guide.

Ask several people

You can ask several members of your audience for their views. This is much more effective than asking just one person, because you will have several points of view to consider. However, it is a time consuming process, involving you in a lot of repetitious work.

Use a focus group

You can ask a focus group, usually consisting of six to ten people drawn from your potential audience. Most people are more than willing to participate in a focus group. There is generally a lot of interest in the activities of governments and large companies, particularly when these affect people personally.

There are many sources you can approach, including community welfare groups, special interest groups and adult literacy groups. Approaching the organiser of just one of these groups will undoubtedly lead to suggestions of others that might be interested in helping.

Equally valuable are people in your own organisation. They are often willing to help,

because they can see the potential for improving their own lives.

These people should include:

- staff who handle inquiries over the counter
- staff who handle errors that people make when completing forms

Staff can be interviewed individually or in focus groups. Their contribution can be invaluable, particularly when you are revising a document already in use.

When you get a focus group together you should find out as much as you can about its members, basically the same things you need to know about your wider audience;-

- age
- education
- occupation
- interests

It is best to collect this information at the end of a session. If the group does not seem representative enough of the document's potential audience, you can consult more focus groups before getting on with the writing.

How to use a focus group

Begin by outlining the purpose of the document and the planned content. Then ask the group to discuss the subject matter, for example what they want in the document and what they would like to see first. Allow the group to discuss the subject matter as freely as they wish.

You must ask some questions directly so that you get the guidance you want for your document. If you have not got everything you need from the general discussion, ask such questions as:

- What would you like to know about this subject?
- What do you know about it already?
- Do you know of any misunderstandings about it in the community?
- Do you agree that?
- What do you want to know first?
- Do you know what these words mean?

Apart from asking these types of questions, you should not participate in the group discussions. Say as little as possible and, above all, do not argue with the group or defend your organisation's position. The main objective of focus groups is to discover any misconceptions about your material, not to put things right at this stage.

Try to keep a record of the discussion. You should at least tape-record the session so that you can check details later. You could videotape it, but you will need to weigh the advantages of video recording against the possible constraining influence of a video camera in the room. You want spontaneous reactions and free discussion, but some people become tongue-tied or overcautious in speech and gestures in front of cameras.

You need not spend much time with a focus group. About two hours is enough.

Test for readers

Tests for readers focus on the performance of members of the intended audience. They reveal how readers cope with a document, where they have difficulty and how they react. There are a number of these tests.

Paraphrasing

Readers are asked to paraphrase a document in their own words. This enables you to measure their success in understanding the major ideas and concepts presented in the document. Omissions and confusion indicate that the document is not getting the message across.

Protocol analysis

Protocol analysis has been developed as a technique for testing documents by the Communication Design Center at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Readers are asked to speak aloud into a tape-recorder. As they read through a document they talk about what they are thinking. It is not unusual for some to comment:

- 'Now the document is talking about ...'
- 'Now it's going off at a tangent to ...'
- 'I wonder what [a word] means.'

If readers develop stories to help themselves understand parts of the document, that action should be noted as well.

Protocol analysis indicates where readers are having problems, where they need more concrete examples, how helpful the organisation of the material is and what words are causing difficulty.

Problem solving

Asking readers to solve problems in a document is a good way to test whether its concepts are explained clearly. Problem solving tests can also indicate how quickly and easily a document can be used.

The Defence Service Homes Corporation used this technique with a draft of a plain English insurance policy it was developing. Typical questions included:

- There is a storm. Can you claim for any damage which is caused if water enters your home through a hole which was there before the storm came?
- Your home is damaged. Do we have to return it to exactly the same condition as it was before?

The results of such questions helped the corporation to decide whether the policy needed rewriting.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire is a useful way to test words and abbreviations that are important to your document. To ask readers for a precise definition is too difficult.

It is easier to offer them a multiple-choice questionnaire, for example.

Tick one or more boxes:

- Restore to a good condition
- Rebuild exactly as it was
- Restore to a similar value less depreciation
- Not sure
- None of these. I think it means

General words as well as obvious technical words should be included in the test because they can cause just as many problems for readers. You need to be sure that everyone who reads your document has the same understanding of the words and abbreviations you have used.

Speed tests

Speed tests measure the time it takes readers to find a specified piece of information. The results of these tests may point to weaknesses in the organisation of material.

Suppose, for example, you are testing a leaflet about pension benefits and you want to see if readers understand who is eligible for a Health Care Card. You would ask the question 'Who can get a Health Care Card?' and then time your readers to see how long it takes them to find the answer in the leaflet.

Their inability to find the answer quickly could be due to poor writing, the lack of meaningful headings or careless layout.

Systems tests

Administrative staff also read and use documents. Documents should therefore work effectively for them as well as the public. This is particularly important when you are writing a policy document or designing a form.

By performing all the steps of a procedure with staff, you should be able to establish how efficiently they can handle the required information. Much of the success of the new summons form (see chapter 23) was due to watching staff process the form under normal working conditions.

Reaction to design

Readers are asked for their reactions to the appearance and design of documents. You can test just one design, but more revealing studies test two or more possibilities by asking readers for their preferences.

Tests on the document

Tests on the document evaluate the document itself and can be carried out in the office independently of the user.

Error rates

organisations tend to ignore the number of errors made by the public in completing forms or responding to letters. However, a study of errors can reveal obscurity in documents. Error rates of more than 5 percent indicate that you need to involve readers in your testing. If most errors are found in one or two parts of a document, this indicates where major revision is required and

where major revision is required and where additional testing should concentrate.

Inquiries

Survey the number and type of inquiries about a document as well. If there have been a lot of inquiries, there is a strong probability that the communication has failed and procedures are overcomplicated. The nature of the inquiries indicates both where and how the document should be improved.

Language tests

Language tests check documents for breaches of the principles of effective writing - for example, overlong sentences, complex structures, use of the passive voice and archaic words. A language expert may carry out the tests, but some of them can now be done through computer programs.

Readability formulas

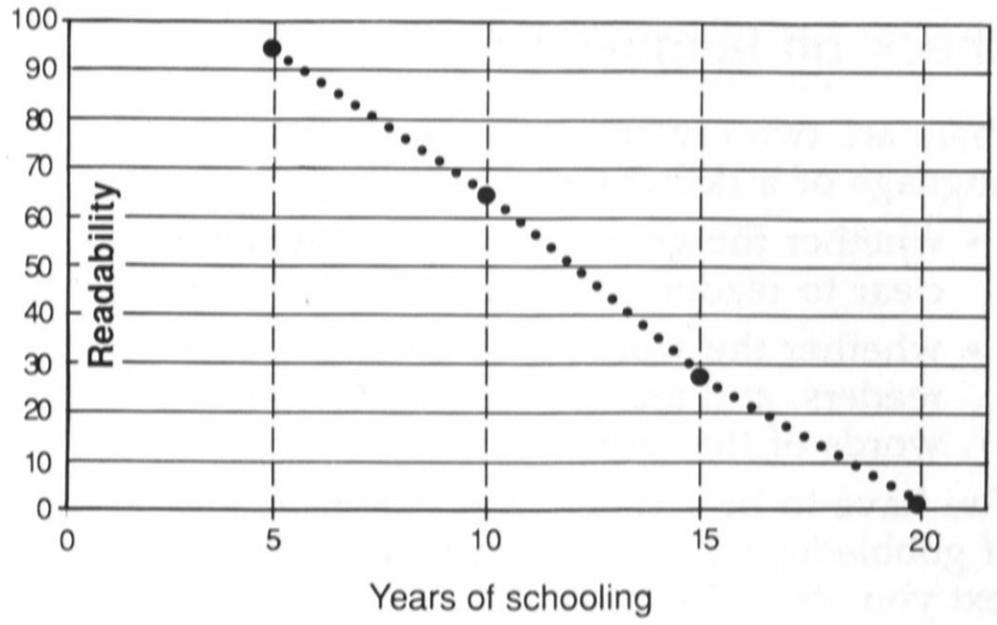
Perhaps the most widely known tests for documents are readability formulas. The best known of these are the Flesch Readability Test and the Gunning Fog Index. They are used to calculate the ease of reading on the basis of the average length of words and sentences in a text.

For example, the Flesch formula is:

- Multiply the average number of words in each sentence by 1.015
- Multiply the average number of syllables in each word by 84.6
- Add the two numbers
- Subtract this sum from 206.835
- The balance is the readability score (R. Flesch, *How to Write in Plain English*, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1981, p. 24).

Client Services in Local Courts

The scale of readability scores usually runs from 0 to 100, 100 registering the easiest level. A score of 90 to 100 is considered to be easy for those with five years' schooling, 60 to 70 for those with eight to nine years. Documents scoring 0 to 30 on this scale would only be within the grasp of a university graduate.



This means that if a document scores a rating lower than 60, there is a high probability that general readers will find it difficult.

However, if a document scores a rating above 60, you cannot confidently assume that general readers will find it easy to understand. This is because readability formulas are limited and only give guidance about sentence length and vocabulary. They cannot record whether a document is badly organised. Nor can they record whether a group of words is ambiguous (such as 'light brown chair') or whether a sentence is grammatically incorrect.

Many word processing packages also have a readability test, and testing documents by this means is relatively easy. You can use these packages as a rough measure once you have produced a draft, but you should be careful not to take the rating of 'easy' at face value. word processing tests should not replace a proper testing program.

Cloze tests

Cloze tests were developed to offset some of the limitations of readability formulas. In a Cloze test, every fifth or seventh word is deleted from a paragraph and readers are asked to fill in the blanks. The readability of the passage is indicated by the percentage of correct words supplied by readers. These tests seem to give a clearer measure of the readers' understanding, and also throw some light on the difficulty of vocabulary, complexity of ideas and organisation of material. The scores correlate closely with the scores of the readability formulas.

Results of testing

The results of testing can be both surprising and revealing. If they show that few people understand your document, you must change that aspect which is causing problems. Once you have made the necessary changes, repeat your test as soon as a new draft is ready.

Remember, however, that tests only point to sources of trouble - they do not provide remedies.