### Editing for Readability

**Samantha Enslen**
**Dragonfly Editorial**
**April 3, 2013**

### What is readability?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hmmmm ...</th>
<th>Ah!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important to recognize the fact that every subject, given that its content is not totally reducible to some other subject area, presents a special set of pedagogic problems arising as a result of the distinctive character of its contents and its essential nature.</td>
<td>Every subject presents its own pedagogic problems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do we measure it?

- **Criteria**
  - Word length
  - Sentence length
  - Paragraph length

- **Measurement tools**
  - Flesch–Kincaid
  - Flesch Reading Ease
  - Coleman–Liau Index
  - Etc.

It is important to recognize the fact that every subject, given that its content is not totally reducible to some other subject area, presents a special set of pedagogic problems arising as a result of the distinctive character of its contents and its essential nature.

- Every subject presents its own pedagogic problems.
Goals

- **Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level**
  - 7th–8th (or 5th)
- **Flesch Reading Ease**
  - 60–70 (on a scale of 100)
- **Words**
  - Shorter rather than longer
- **Sentences**
  - Average 14 words (but no more than 21)
- **Paragraphs**
  - Average 42 words
  - Or 1–3 sentences

Why is it important?

- Busy readers
- Distracted readers
- They don’t *really* care about your content
- But ... we still want to reach them
Why is it important?

“If a reader can’t understand, the text is essentially worthless.”

— John McIntyre, in Copyediting.com seminar *Choosing Your Battles*

How to improve readability

- Choose words wisely
- Shrink sentences
- Pick apart paragraphs
- Measure
- Explain
**Choose Words Wisely**

**Long vs. Short**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of ...</th>
<th>Try ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Accordingly</td>
<td>• So</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Facilitate</td>
<td>• Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Immediately</td>
<td>• Now</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Complex vs. Simple

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of …</th>
<th>Try …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remuneration</td>
<td>Pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liaise</td>
<td>Meet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enumerate</td>
<td>List</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Two words vs. one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Redundant</th>
<th>Clear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tired cliché</td>
<td>Cliché</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-planning</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious crisis</td>
<td>Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolutely certain</td>
<td>Certain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New innovations</td>
<td>Innovations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Four words vs. one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wordy</th>
<th>Simple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Until such time as</td>
<td>• Until</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have a need for</td>
<td>• Need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Despite the fact that</td>
<td>• Despite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Make a decision to</td>
<td>• Decide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Readability score?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avg. grade level = 13.8</th>
<th>Avg. grade level = 5.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Until such time as we</td>
<td>• Until we decide to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make a decision to</td>
<td>begin planning to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>begin pre-planning to</td>
<td>address this crisis,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>address this serious</td>
<td>we can’t list the pay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crisis, we cannot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enumerate the remunera-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Vague vs. Specific

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We provide end-to-end publishing services.</th>
<th>We write, edit, and design.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We help you assess your landscaping needs.</td>
<td>We help you choose plants that will flourish in your yard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Acronyms vs. Real Words

| TRA will support USCR in running DPS 24x7. | We will support your firm in running the DPS system around the clock. |
Two Words vs. Contractions

- They are evolving, though not as quickly as we would like.
- They’re evolving, though not as quickly as we’d like.

Big caveat
“Editing is not an exact science; it is an art guided by instinct and enhanced by training and the tools of the trade.”

— Mary J. Scroggins, in Substance & Style: Instruction and Practice in Copyediting
Bigglesworth & Co. maintains the world’s largest and industry-leading network of nearly 200 offices in more than 30 countries and territories, generating a dynamic mix of an unmatched global footprint with valuable insight and local expertise to meet the needs of its hundreds of clients per year, across all industry sectors, small- and medium-sized enterprises, local, multinational and global companies.

Klinger sales representatives can instantly check a customer’s credit, quickly source the needed products within the company’s global inventory, and ensure that the products are shipped to the customer on time, without having to “correct” a customer order when the day-old inventory report reveals a particular batch of printers is no longer in stock or available for shipping.

- Readability = 27.5
Strategy 1: Break it up

Klinger sales representatives can instantly check a customer’s credit, quickly source the needed products within the company’s global inventory, and ensure that the products are shipped to the customer on time.

They no longer must “correct” a customer order when the day-old inventory report reveals a particular batch of printers is no longer in stock or available for shipping.

- Readability = 15.6

Strategy 2: Cut it Out

Klinger sales representatives can instantly check a customer’s credit, quickly source the needed products within the company’s global inventory, and ensure that the products are shipped to the customer on time.

They no longer must “correct” a customer order when the day-old inventory report reveals a particular batch of printers is no longer in stock or available for shipping.
Strategy 2: Cut it Out

Klinger sales representatives can instantly check a customer’s credit, source the needed products within the company’s global inventory, and ensure that the products are shipped on time.

They no longer must “correct” an order when day-old inventory reports reveal certain printers are no longer in stock or available for shipping.

- Readability = 13.8

Strategy 3: Bullet it Up

Klinger sales representatives can:

- Instantly check a customer’s credit
- Source the needed products within the company’s global inventory
- Ensure that the products are shipped on time.

They no longer must “correct” an order when day-old inventory reports reveal certain printers are no longer in stock or available for shipping.

- Readability = 10.0
... IN OTHER WORDS, SIMPLIFY!

We have established two special programs aimed at expanding collaboration opportunities with industry partners both in the U.S. and globally.

---

We have two programs that promote collaboration with our industry partners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wordy</th>
<th>Clear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have established two special programs aimed at expanding collaboration opportunities with industry partners both in the U.S. and globally.</td>
<td>We have two programs that promote collaboration with our industry partners.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Unnecessary words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wordy</th>
<th>Clear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These programs are meant to develop and implement venues to foster relationships and engagements between industry and the university.</td>
<td>These programs foster relationships between industry and the university.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Noun strings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eh?</th>
<th>Ah!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diabetic patient chest pain reduction effects may be a consequence of taking Ranolazine.</td>
<td>Taking Ranolazine can reduce chest pain in patients with diabetes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Noun Strings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What?</th>
<th>Oh.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• We provide cloud-based software deployment management services to the Government.</td>
<td>• We help the Government deploy cloud-based software.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ... often preceded by “provided”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boring.</th>
<th>(Not as boring.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Dragonfly provides corporate writing and editing services to firms worldwide.</td>
<td>• Dragonfly writes and edits for companies worldwide.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Sluggish verb constructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slow</th>
<th>Brisk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• This publication is designed to introduce investors to our capabilities.</td>
<td>• This publication introduces investors to our capabilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Sluggish verb constructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slow</th>
<th>Brisk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The finalization of the bill was brought about by the committee chairs.</td>
<td>• The committee chairs finalized the bill.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### “It is” constructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distant</th>
<th>Nice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is preferable that companies commit to a long-term partnership.</td>
<td>We suggest that companies commit to a long-term partnership.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### “It is” constructions

- It is essential that transaction activity be monitored in real time.
- Transactions must be monitored in real time. 
  - or
- We must monitor transactions in real time.

- *Readability = 9.1*
- *Readability = 5.7*
### Third person vs. first

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stiff</th>
<th>Personal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• During a child’s overnight stay, Dayton Children’s compassionate care team will make the safety and comfort of the child a priority.</td>
<td>• During your child’s overnight stay, our compassionate care team will make the safety and comfort of your child our priority.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Formal/“proper” language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional</th>
<th>Direct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Thomas can be reached at 413-2619.  
• Please be advised that the deadline has been changed to May 3.  
• We regret to inform you that ... | • Reach Thomas at 413-2619.  
• The deadline is now May 3.  
• Sorry, sucker! |
### Formal/“proper” language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obscure</th>
<th>Plainspoken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• This meeting serves as a means to receive suggestions and recommendations about how we can continue to improve the efficacy and effectiveness of our services.</td>
<td>• At this meeting, you can give us feedback on how we are doing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Unnecessary adjectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaningless</th>
<th>Simple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Employees can access world-class, hands-on, leader-led professional and executive education. | • Employees can access relevant, quality education.  
  ○ or  
  • Employees can learn about new welding methods.                        |
### Jargon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whatever!</th>
<th>Alright, better.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- We are thought leaders who use best-of-breed tools, have industry-standard processes, and utilize bleeding-edge, state-of-the-art technology.</td>
<td>- We pull the best tools from our industry, while always pushing ourselves to try new techniques.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Jargon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>- We will be available on an as-needed basis.</th>
<th>- We will be available whenever needed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- We’ll be available when needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- We’re free whenever you need us.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Remember that each profession has its favorite words, its particular vocabulary, and its sacred cows. ... You must consider the intended audience: A specialist writing for other specialists can use expressions that someone writing for a lay audience can’t.”

— Mary Stoughton, *Substance & Style: Instruction and Practice in Copyediting*

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**Padding**

- In essence, the agency has two mutually supportive functions.
- The agency has two mutually supportive functions.
### Padding

- Our artists have appeared in *Fast Company* and *Wired* magazines, to name a few.

- Our artists have appeared in *Fast Company* and *Wired* magazines.

### Fluffy nonsense

- Your custom artwork will be polished to pristine inimitable standards, ensuring that you look your best.

- ????
The Big Data Challenge

Though new tools have helped Klinger effectively manage its financial and transactional reporting needs and analyze data to make informed business decisions, the company faced a challenge that many large, global organizations face: difficulty managing "big data." Big data is any collection of raw data that is becoming so large and complex that traditional disk-based database tools are unable to process it in a timely manner. Because it was taking so long to process and capture transactional data from multiple Klinger systems — much of it processed through overnight batch processing — the data was already dated by the time it could be reviewed and analyzed. Basically, big data was limiting Klinger’s visibility into real-time activity. It not only limited the company’s ability to plan and forecast with precision, it also limited their ability to quickly and accurately process customer orders to guarantee products were in stock and would arrive on time.

- Readability = 16.3
Strategy 1: Break it Up

The Big Data Challenge

Though new tools have helped Klinger effectively manage its financial and transactional reporting needs and analyze data to make informed business decisions, the company faced a challenge that many large, global organizations face: difficulty managing “big data.”

Big data is any collection of raw data that is becoming so large and complex that traditional disk-based database tools are unable to process it in a timely manner.

Because it was taking so long to process and capture transactional data from multiple Klinger systems — much of it processed through overnight batch processing — the data was already dated by the time it could be reviewed and analyzed.

Basically, big data was limiting Klinger’s visibility into real-time activity.

It not only limited the company’s ability to plan and forecast with precision, it also limited their ability to quickly and accurately process customer orders to guarantee products were in stock and would arrive on time.

Strategy 2: Set Guideposts

The Big Data Challenge

Though these tools have helped Klinger effectively manage its financial and transactional reporting needs and analyze data to make informed business decisions, the company faced a challenge that many large, global organizations face: difficulty managing “big data.”

Big data = too much raw data

Big data is any collection of raw data that is becoming so large and complex that traditional disk-based database tools are unable to process it in a timely manner.

Because it was taking so long to process and capture transactional data from multiple Klinger systems — much of it processed through overnight batch processing — the data was already dated by the time it could be reviewed and analyzed.

When we can’t process data, we can’t make decisions

Basically, big data was limiting Klinger’s visibility into real-time activity.

It not only limited the company’s ability to plan and forecast with precision, it also limited their ability to quickly and accurately process customer orders to guarantee products were in stock and would arrive on time.
Strategy 3: One Sentence = One Para

The Big Data Challenge

Though these tools have helped Klinger effectively manage its financial and transactional reporting needs and analyze data to make informed business decisions, the company faced a challenge that many large, global organizations face: difficulty managing “big data.”

What is Big Data?

Big data is any collection of raw data that is becoming so large and complex that traditional disk-based database tools are unable to process it in a timely manner.

Because it was taking so long to process and capture transactional data from multiple Klinger systems — much of it processed through overnight batch processing — the data was already dated by the time it could be reviewed and analyzed.

When can’t process it, we can’t make decisions

Basically, big data was limiting Klinger’s visibility into real-time activity.

It not only limited the company’s ability to plan and forecast with precision, it also limited their ability to quickly and accurately process customer orders to guarantee products were in stock and would arrive on time.

Measure
Goals

- **Sentences**
  - Average 14 words (but no more than 21)

- **Paragraphs**
  - Average 42 words
  - Or 1–3 sentences

- **Flesch Reading Ease**
  - 60–70 (on a scale of 100)

- **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level**
  - 7th–8th (or 5th)

Microsoft Word

- Click the *File* tab, and then click *Options*.
- Click *Proofing*.
- Make sure the *Check grammar with spelling check box* is selected.
- Select *Show readability statistics*. 
StoryToolz and Others

- StoryToolz
- Edit Central’s readability calculators
- Gunning Fog Index calculator
- OKAPI!
- TXReadability
- WordsCount’s SMOG Calculator
- ... just Google “readability calculator”
Explain

Writers think readability means ...

- Flat, boring copy
- Dumbed-down copy
- Pandering to the lowest common denominator
- “See Spot run. See Jane smile. See Tom dig.”
Writers also argue that...

- My readers are really smart
  - ... they are PhDs / doctors / engineers / scientists
  - ... they are CEOs / CIOs / business owners
- My subject matter is really technical / complex
- Therefore readability doesn’t apply to me

“An author’s greatest fear is to appear, as a result of revision, less than brilliant. The good editor convinces authors that without revision their genius will be obscured.”

— Arthur Plotnick, in Substance & Style: Instruction and Practice in Copyediting
Readability actually means ...

- Lively, vivid copy
- Clear, understandable copy
- Reaching a wider audience
- People actually read what you write!

Example 1: *Wall Street Journal*

... As medical personnel swarmed Ware in front of the Cardinals’ bench, his teammates fell to the ground, horrified. What exactly had happened? Replays on CBS confirmed a terrible injury. A cold hush covered Lucas Oil Stadium. Ware’s coach, Rick Pitino, huddled his team in tears. Duke players stood silently, shaken. The NCAA tournament is typically such a centrifuge of energy and noise. This was silent and brutal. A three-week circus with 68 teams suddenly meant so much less than the immediate future of one young man lying crumpled on the floor.
Example 1: Stats

- Flesch-Kincaid Readability: 5.0
- Avg. words per sentence: 10.1
- Number of passive sentences: 2 out of 9

Example 2: Popular Science

The specifics of how a single-celled organism called *Tetrahymena thermophila* gets it on has been a scientific mystery for more than 50 years. See, *T. thermophila* has seven sexes, and it can reproduce in 21 combinations. For sexy-time, each *T. thermophila* can mate with another *T. thermophila* that has any of the six other sexes. But with so many options, how do cells determine which sex their progeny will be?
Example 2: Stats

- Flesch–Kincaid Readability: 5.0
- Avg. words per sentence: 9
- Number of passive sentences: 2 out of 5

Example 3: 37 Signals sales copy

We built the company that we’d want to do business with. We hope you do too.

1. Useful is forever
   Bells and whistles wear off, but usefulness never does. We build useful software that does just what you need and nothing you don’t.

2. Great service is everything
   We’re famous for fast and friendly customer service. We work hard to make sure we live up to that reputation every day. [See how our customers rate our service](#).
Example 3: Stats

- Flesch–Kincaid Readability: 5.8
- Avg. words per sentence: 13.0
- Number of passive sentences: 2 out of 6

“Good editors are not obsessed with commas, spacing around headings, or parallelism. We are obsessed with readers and their ability to understand printed words and thoughts as effortlessly as possible.”

— Mary J. Scroggins, in Substance & Style: Instruction and Practice in Copyediting
Thanks

WRITE ME, OK?

SAM@DRAGONFLYEDITORIAL.COM

Sources

- StoryToolz home page. storytoolz.com/
- *Substance & Style: Instruction and Practice in Copyediting*. Mary Stoughton, EEI Press, 1996.
  http://www.prsa.org/intelligence/tactics/articles/view/9637/1045/the_art_of_the_short_story_how_long_will_it_take_t?spMailingID=4669877&spUserID=MzY3OTk2MTAwMzA1&spJobID=139584814&spReportId=MTM5NTg0ODE0.


