

OPEN TO PERSUASION

Making ourselves understood

We write copy to give people information about the events and activities that our organisations offer, and to persuade them to take action. Unfortunately we don't always succeed:

What I dislike about some brochures is that it's very difficult to get the information out of them. Midlands Arts Marketing, Live and Direct: research into contemporary music attendance in Nottingham (1998)

We're all well-educated, articulate people, so why don't we get our message across? Well, the problem is that we are well-educated, articulate people and most people are not. Most of the copy that we write is incomprehensible to most people because they can't read it. Readability is about whether a piece of text can be read successfully. There are two sides to this, namely: do they have the necessary technical skills to read it; and can they get meaning from it? Quite often people are able to read bits of what we write but cannot integrate those bits into a meaningful whole.

Health professionals, just like us, seek to give people information and persuade them to take action. They have been researching how they can do this better.¹ They discovered that much of the available health education material needs the reading ability of an average 15 year old. Unfortunately, the estimated average reading age of people in the UK is 9 years of age.

Is arts copy any better?

The FOG Index gives you a rough guide to whether your copy is readable. It was invented by an American educationalist called Robert Gunning² and has been updated since. This is how it works:

- select a sample of at least 100 words;
- divide the number of words by the number of complete sentences in your sample to find out the average number of words per sentence;
- count the number of words with three or more syllables – don't include proper nouns, verbs with suffixes or portmanteau words which combine shorter words;
- add the average number of words per sentence to number of difficult words and multiply by two;
- now divide the result by five and add five;
- this gives you the reading age needed to understand your copy.

Here is some copy taken from the Barbican's Bite season this summer:

Everyday Uses for Sight

New York performer, puppeteer and miniaturist Dan Hurlin presents a two-part evening of object theatre. In what has been described as a 'love letter to sight', Hurlin creates a daisy chain of incisively poignant, poetic moments generating a disturbing and complex examination of something we take for granted everyday.

No. 3: The Home of Bill and Sandy Kelly intermingles the story of one boy's voyeuristic fixation with his neighbours and one man's compulsive photographic documentation of the work of architect Louis Sullivan.

No 7: The Heart of the Andes is a pop-up book for grown ups. Using boxes which open to reveal Lilliputian props or miniature-paintings, frames and artworks suspended and layered, the piece lovingly explores the tricks and devices employed to manipulate ways of seeing.

There are 123 words and four sentences. There is an average of 30.7 words per sentence, and 15 words with three or more syllables. Add the average words per sentence and the number of words with three or more syllables (30.7 + 15) to make 45.7. Multiply 45.7 by 2 to get 91.4 and divide by 5 to make 18.3. Now add 5. This gives a reading age of 23.3.

The health professionals set themselves the goal of a reading age of 12 when they were making their patient information leaflets more readable. This piece of copy does not come close. The Fog Index checks the technical readability of copy but it doesn't explore how easy it is to get meaning from it. There are two other useful tests that you should use alongside it.

The first is a Cloze Test. It sounds impressive but simply involves a lot of Tippex and some guinea pigs from your target group. Take about 250 words of copy and delete the 36th word and every tenth word after that. Carry on until you have deleted a total of 20 words. Now give your copy to your guinea pigs to read. Can they guess what the blanked-out word is or give another word that means the same thing? If they can't fill in at least 13 out of the 20 blanks then you need to do some rewriting.

The final test is to read your copy aloud. If you feel silly or awkward then think again. And my tips for making copy more readable? Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs. ■

Heather Maitland, Consultant,
e-mail: hmaitland1@aol.com

¹ Wilson, Rob, (1997) *Ensuring the Readability and Understandability and Efficacy of Patient Information Leaflets*. Newcastle: Sowerby Centre for Health Informatics at Newcastle

² Gunning, Robert, (1968) *The Technique of Clear Writing*. New York: McGraw-Hill