

Quick Checklist for Plain Language *(continued)*

More tips

What about using readability formulas?

You might think from the name that readability formulas measure reading ease or comprehension, but they do not. They count syllables, words, and sentences to calculate a grade level score, and ignore everything else.

If the grade level score is high, it means the material is too difficult for most readers. However, a low score does not mean the material will be easy for readers to understand and use. That's because short words and sentences are only one of many things that help readers understand the material.

Formulas cannot measure whether the purpose is clear, the words are familiar, or the explanations make sense. They don't address whether the main points are easy to find or the formatting guides the reader. They can't see if the text is too small or the page is too crowded.

Because readability formulas ignore most of the factors that facilitate comprehension, grade level scores cannot accurately assess whether the material is easy to read and understand.

What about field testing?

Field testing is the best and most direct way to tell if materials are easy to understand and use. Show them to people who represent the readers, and watch your test participants while they read. If you're testing informational materials, ask them to tell you about the content in their own words. If you're testing instructional materials, ask them to do the tasks, or (if that's not practical) ask them to tell you what they would do.

You will learn whether they can read and understand the materials, and how long it takes. You can find out if they think the materials are useful and appealing, and whether they can easily follow instructions and recognize important messages. You'll see if they get confused or frustrated, and you'll know where to make improvements.

Authors and resources

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*The Health Literacy Style Manual
Translation: A Must-Have Guide
Five Guidelines for Developing
Customer-Friendly Websites*

To see these manuals in PDF, go to
maximus.com/chl.

McGee & Evers Consulting, Inc.

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*Toolkit for Making Written Material
Clear and Effective.* Jeanne McGee,
for the Centers for Medicare &
Medicaid Services (CMS).
www.cms.gov/WrittenMaterialsToolkit

This 11-part toolkit includes a step-by-step guide to field testing. Search for *Toolkit Part 6*.