



Carleton

Writing for the Web

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Reading Level: Assumptions

- Higher reading level = Better writing
- Better writing = More educated author

Academic writing is often focused on trying to impress the reader with the depth and breadth of the author's knowledge, not on trying to communicate efficiently and effectively.

Reading Level: Reality

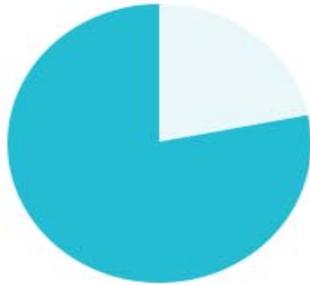
- The average reading level in the US is Grade 8.
- Ernest Hemingway, the Pulitzer- and Nobel Prize-winning novelist whose work shaped 20th-century fiction, wrote at a 4th-grade reading level.

Reading Level

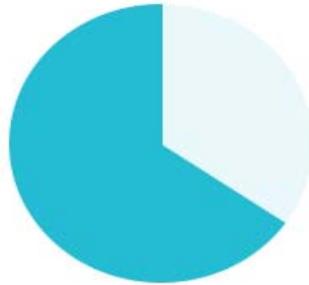
% of Americans Who Can Read...

@shanesnow

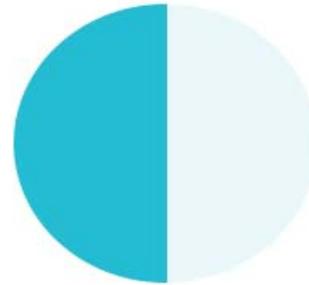
The Old Man and the Sea



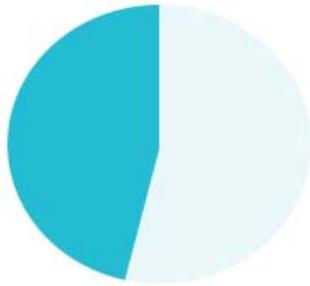
Harry Potter



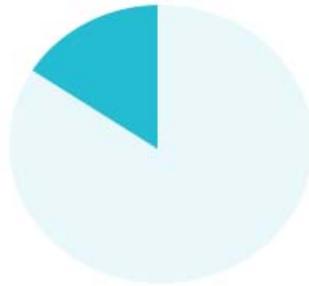
The Tipping Point



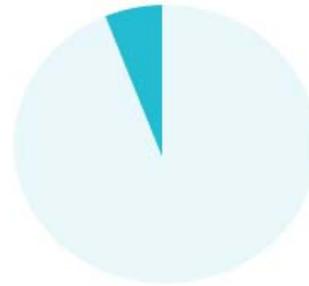
Jurassic Park



Good to Great



An Academic Paper



Source: contently.com

Low Literacy?

- Studies show that low literacy affects nearly half of US adults, *BUT...*
- The **real issue** is that we are **ALL** low literacy at times.
- When you're tired, busy, or under stress, it's much harder to understand what you read.

Distracted Readers

- The point isn't to write for grade-schoolers, the point is to write for **distracted readers**.
- Most of your readers probably don't have low literacy skills, but when they are reading your content ONLINE, they may behave as though they do.

Simplifying ≠ “Dumbing Down”

“Won’t dumbing down the content make it unpleasant for everyone else?”

- Making information easier for everyone to read, understand, and use is a noble goal. Everybody appreciates clarity.

“If something can be said simply, it should be. Using big words isn’t impressive. Getting points across simply, but with great clarity *is*.” ~ Douglas Richards

Before you start writing for the web...

- Let's focus a bit on **READING** on the web.

Reading on the Web

It's physically more difficult

- Screens are **lower resolution** than print
 - Print = at least 300 dots per inch
 - Computer screen = 72 dpi
- It's **slower** than reading a printed page
 - About 25% slower
 - More tiring to the eyes

Reading on the Web

We read differently online

- We **skim** and **scan** to find what we're looking for
- We **quickly abandon pages** that don't look immediately relevant or digestible
- Certain **parts of the page** get more attention than others
 - [Lazy Eyes: How we read online](#)

Before you Begin...

- The best websites are focused on the **user**. Ask yourself...
 - Who's visiting this site?
 - What do they want to know?
 - What do they want to **DO**?
- The best sites serve different interest levels
 - [Web Writing for Many Interest Levels](#)
 - One sentence summary
 - One paragraph summary
 - Thirst for more

Good Web Writing is...

- Scannable
- Inverted
- Concise
- Focused
- Real
- Error-free

Scannable

- Use meaningful **headlines**
- Break up long paragraphs into shorter ones
- Use formatting to emphasize the main points
- Use **lists** whenever possible
- Don't try to be too clever
- Use the words your readers are looking for

Scannable: Bad Example

The person who is humble and retiring has three characteristics: mysterious charm, unspectacular excellence, and unnoticed influence. We consider the charm mysterious because the person does nothing we can see to draw our attention. We call the excellence unspectacular because the person does not boast, or make announcements, but completes all work with thoroughness. We call this person's influence unnoticed because although everyone looks to this person as an authority, they hardly mention the name. The influence spreads like water underground, invisible.

Scannable: Better Example

The person who is humble and retiring has three characteristics:

- 1. Mysterious charm:** We consider the charm mysterious because the person does nothing we can see to draw our attention.
- 2. Unspectacular excellence:** We call the excellence unspectacular because the person does not boast, or make announcements, but completes all work with thoroughness.
- 3. Unnoticed influence:** We call this person's influence unnoticed because although everyone looks to this person as an authority, they hardly mention the name. The influence spreads like water underground, invisible.

Inverted

- Put results, conclusions or must-know information at the **top** of the screen
- Start with a preview / summary
 - One-sentence overview or bullet list
- The opposite of most academic writing!
 - [Why Writing Like a College Student Will Kill You Online](#)

Inverted: Bad Example

Taking a shower, washing dishes, and doing your laundry all add moisture to the air in your Recreational Vehicle. Any appliance generates heat, and may cause condensation on cool surfaces such as windows, doors, walls, and roof. The walls of your RV have less insulation than a house does, so cold weather makes drops of water form on the inside walls. Remember—if you let moisture build up inside, it can damage the walls and ceiling of your RV.

Inverted: Good Example

Don't let moisture build up inside your RV. It can damage the walls and ceiling of your vehicle.

- Taking a shower, washing dishes, and doing your laundry all add moisture to the air.
- Most appliances generate heat, which may cause condensation on cool surfaces such as windows, doors, walls, and roof.
- The walls of your RV have less insulation than a house does, so cold weather makes drops of water form on the inside walls.

Concise

- Cut your text to half what you would use in print
- Use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs
- Again, if it *can* be in a list, make it a list
- Use active voice (it's usually shorter, as well as more powerful)

Concise: Exercise

“Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.”

— Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Concise: Improved

I must go to sea when:

- I'm depressed or melancholy
- I stop in front of coffin warehouses
- I follow funerals
- I have a powerful urge to knock people's hats off

Concise: Bonus Points!

“Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.”

One sentence summary:

“I must go to sea when I’m sad or angry or obsessed with death.”

Focused

- Stick to **one idea** per paragraph
- Make sure each page makes sense if read in isolation (because it may be)
- Use links/navigation to connect topics that make up a larger series of topics
 - Make your links descriptive: Say “Visit the [Digital Humanities Blog](#),” **NOT** “Visit <http://blogs.carleton.edu/dh/>”
 - Don’t say “Click here.”
 - [Why Your Links Should Never Say “Click Here”](#)

Real

Use plain language

- Direct, honest, free of jargon
- Avoid “marketing-speak” and “academese”
- Write to inform, not to impress
- Use acronyms & abbreviations sparingly

[Attack of the Zombie Copy](#)

“Empty of everything but a terrible hunger for human brains”

Real

Write the way you speak

- Don't worry so much about proper grammatical structure. Write the way your audience talks.
- Read your writing out loud
- Use a screen reader (such as [Natural Reader](#)) to read it for you

Real: Exercise

How would you rewrite this email to give it a fighting chance of being read?

“Hello Doug, my name is Charles Peek. I work for a company named Fast Track Transfer. The purpose of this email is to provide you with an opportunity to view a product that we have recently acquired. Also to determine if the product could be a finishing touch on your new Residence Hall project or any existing facility. We have in our possession, around 250 armoires that we removed from a very high end hotel in downtown Minneapolis. Attached are some pictures of this very versatile armoire. This would be a very cost effective way to give even a new facility a face lift. If this email finds you and you do not deal with these issues, I would be very thankful if you could forward it on to the correct person. Please feel free to call or email myself or Mike at the number below. Thank you and have a great day.”

Real: Another Bad Example

Discover Kickbox

- Good formatting...
 - Headings & bullet lists
- But who talks like this?
 - “Individuals can use this site to go through the Kickbox process on their own and organizations can deploy the Kickbox process to their employees at scale.”
- (And the vague photo doesn't help!)

Error-Free

- Harder to read = harder to proofread
 - Skimming leads to “Predictive processing”
 - Your brain fills in/corrects information
- Ask someone else to proof for you!
 - Or print the page and read a physical copy

Error-Free

- Proof for *clarity*, not just spelling & grammar.
Ask the reader:
 - Where were you bored?
 - Where were you confused?
 - Where were you annoyed?
 - What did you get out of it?

Tools to Improve Readability

- [Hemingway App](#)
 - Shows grade level, flags passive voice, adverbs, etc.
- [Tone Analyzer](#)
 - Uses linguistic analysis to detect emotional, social, and writing tone. Offers suggestions for improvement.