

The Fog Index

Getting your message across

If you work for an organisation, you will often have to write for public consumption.

This writing may take a number of forms:

- Leaflets
- Posters
- Brochures
- Annual reports
- Circular letters
- Articles

There are several factors which affect whether your message gets across = for example, design layout, size of print etc.

One key factor is the 'readability' of what you have written. The golden rule is always to write clearly and simply. But quite often it is difficult for you to identify something you have written as over-long and complex.

Readability

Readability is affected by:

- The average length of a sentence
- The percentage of simple words
- The percentage of words expressing forceful action
- The proportion of familiar words
- The proportion of abstract words
- The proportion of personal references
- The proportion of long words

Of these, the most common problem affecting readability is the sentence length.

You might like to note that some American research found that:

Only 4% of readers will understand a sentence of 27 words
But 75% of readers will understand a sentence of 17 words
and 95% of readers will understand a sentence of 8 words.

Measuring Difficulty

There are a number of ways to measure the readability of written language.....the fog index is one.

It is used extensively in both the public and private sectors.

- British Leyland introduced it when a researcher discovered that a memo to workers which contained an ultimatum had a reading age equivalent to university level.
- Newspapers such as the Daily Mirror, The Sun and The Star use a version which ensures that they can be understood by anyone. The Daily Mirror, for example, is aimed at a reading age of 12.
- Advertising copywriters use a specialist version which ensures that everyone can understand e.g. holiday brochures
- The Health Education Council use a version to determine whether or not their information on e.g. contraception is accessible.

The Index

Fog indexing doesn't cover all the factors under 'readability' but emphasises word difficulty and sentence length (note there are a number of versions of the index).

The version below is based on a count of the number of longer words in a simple passage, as well as the average sentence length.

To determine the difficulty of the passage you will need to:

1. Select a sample of 100 words
2. Calculate the average number of words in the sentences of your sample. Count the number of complete sentences and divide that into the number of words.
3. Count the number of words with three or more syllables, excluding words with a capital letter, compounds such as bookkeeper, and words ending in –es and –ed
4. Add the average number of words per sentence and the number of three syllables or more and multiply by 0.4

An easy reading age is considered between 6-10.

The average person reads at the level 9.

Anything above 17th level is difficult for university students.