

The fog index . . .

Try reading the following sentence out loud, seven times. Each time you speak it, emphasize just one of the words, a different one each time:

"I never said she stole my money."

Seven different meanings, right?

But at least you were able to use vocal inflections to make sure people knew what you meant.

In a written document, it's not always that easy. Most writers would solve the problem by italicizing one of the seven words. But that's kid stuff. How do you make sure *your* writing is easy to understand, on a *consistent* basis?

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Two men tackled that problem in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Rudolf Flesch (*photo at right*) wrote *The Art of Readable Writing* in 1948 and Robert Gunning (*photo at left*) wrote *The Technique of Clear Writing* in 1952. Flesch concentrated on making sure your writing was easy to read; Gunning wanted to make sure it was easy to understand.



One result of their work is "The Fog Index," which measures whether your readers can clearly understand what you've written. I've been teaching it for years and I'm indebted to my friend Tom Callinan for reminding me recently that Flesch and Gunning had different purposes. (Tom was ranting online about the need to banish jargon and start writing grant proposals in plain English.)

Extensive research over the past six decades has repeatedly demonstrated the practicality of the index. It's widely used by newspapers, textbook publishers and others -- but rarely in law, government, medicine . . . or, sadly, in business.

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How easy is it for *your* stakeholders to understand your business plans, grant proposals, brochures and other documents?

You can use The Fog Index to find out. For example, *Time* magazine is written at the level of a high school junior, comic books at the level of a sixth grader.

Here's the formula:

- STEP ONE: Choose a sample of at least 100 words and then divide the number of words in your sample by the number of sentences (for example, 126 words divided by six sentences equals 20.5)
- STEP TWO: Count the number of words in your sample that have three or more syllables . . . but don't count any words that are capitalized, any combinations of short easy words such as "bookkeeper," or any verbs made into three syllables by adding "ed" or "es" (such as "expanded" or "expresses")
- STEP THREE: Divide the number of words with three or more syllables by the total number of words in the sample (for example, 11 such words divided by 126 is a percentage of 8.73)
- STEP FOUR: Add the results of steps one and three ($20.5 + 8.73 = 29.23$)
- STEP FIVE: Multiply the result of step four by .4 ($29.23 \times .4 = 11.69$)

According to The Fog Index, a score of 11.69 means your writing is not easily understood by anybody whose reading skills are below the level of a high school senior:

GRADE LEVEL	SCORE	EXAMPLES
College graduate	17	
College senior	16	
College junior	15	
College sophomore	14	
College freshman	13	
High school senior	12	
High school junior	11	<i>The Wall Street Journal, Time</i>
High school sophomore	10	<i>Reader's Digest</i>
High school freshman	9	
Eighth grade	8	Most best-selling books
Seventh grade	7	Most best-selling books, <i>The Bible</i>
Sixth grade	6	<i>The Bible</i> , comic books, Mark Twain

Applying The Fog Index to your written communications could explain why some stakeholders aren't getting your message. The ideal score is 7 or 8 ("most best-selling books") . . . and anything above 12 will probably be misunderstood or ignored.

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The first time I brought the fog index into the classroom for my graduate students, I randomly selected two samples from my own writing and tested them against the formula.

Here's the first, the opening paragraphs from one of my books:

“Social innovators around the world have begun to reach a disquieting conclusion: Inspired vision, impassioned leadership, enthusiastic volunteers, government subsidies and a phalanx of donors are not always enough.

“They serve admirably while innovators transform their dreams into fledgling programs and steer their organizations through early growing pains. But there comes a time, albeit reluctantly, when most founders and their followers begin to understand that living from year to year does not ensure the future, and that is the moment when they begin migrating from innovation to entrepreneurship. It is one thing to design, develop and carry out a new program, quite another to sustain it. So they begin turning toward commercial markets, gradually exploring the possibilities of earned income, many for the first time, and often with reluctance given their uneasiness about the profit motive.”

Turns out I was writing at the level of a college freshman.

Here’s the second, an excerpt from an essay I wrote about returning 25 years later to the village in India where I spent two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the late 1960s:

“The village remains, but its boundaries have exploded. Dozens of shops bustle down the road toward the school. A model town grows to the north. Motorcycles shoulder through the streets, and television antenna leap from every other rooftop.

“But . . .

“In the older part of town, the lanes still wander quietly, then disappear. Women sit comfortably outdoors on charpois, surrounded by their children. Solitary pigs snort past them toward unseen destinations. Cows pick their way across broken cobblestones. Occasional students race homeward.

“As the day wanes, the sky reaches down, all reds and golds and orange, inches above my head. Chants from the temple drift across the rooftops, and spices scent the air from hundreds of kitchens. Families gather . . . and a warm glow slips over my memories.”

This time I was writing for eighth graders.

And, given my intentions and the audiences I hoped to reach, I was in the right neighborhood both times.

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So why not give it a try?

Pick one of your brochures, one of your grant proposals and one of your tech manuals. Choose a sample from each and run the numbers.

The results might please or disturb you, but, either way, you’ll have a better handle on how well you’re communicating with your key stakeholders.

(FYI: According to The Fog Index, you need to have 11th-grade reading skills to easily understand the first ten paragraphs of this essay.)