



## Client Communications: Guide to Readability (Grade Level) Tests

How do you know the reading level of a document or text? How do you find out if something is at a sixth-grade reading level? This information comes from *readability tests*.

### What do readability tests measure?

Readability tests measure how easy or difficult it is to read something based on the number of sentences, words and characters or syllables in a passage of text. If a document has many characters or syllables but few words, it means the words are long and probably challenging to read. If a passage of text has lots of words but not many sentences, the sentences might be too long and difficult to read.

Readability tests do not measure whether the text is clear, understandable or appropriate for the users. While a readability test might alert you to complexity, it's not a helpful tool for making your writing clear or relevant.

### How does the readability test assign a grade level?

Different readability tests have their own formulas to measure the number of characters or syllables, words and sentences. The formula results in a score along with a guide that tells you what the score means. Many tests then assign a grade level to the score instead of a label like easy/moderate/difficult. This involves some questionable guesswork and it's different for each readability test.

Don't focus too much on the exact grade level; they are not very precise. If your document is at a twelfth-grade reading level, you probably have work to do. But if it's at a seventh-grade level and you're using readability best practices, don't get hung up on the exact level.

### How many readability tests are there?

Quite a few. Here are five common ones:

- Flesch Reading Ease & Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
- SMOG
- Fry
- Gunning-Fog Score
- Coleman-Liau Index

### Which readability test is available in Microsoft Word?

The Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level tests are part of the Microsoft Word software. Open Word, go to Options, and find the Spelling and Grammar options. Select the option "Show Readability Statistics" when you run a spelling and grammar check. The readability score, along with percentage of passive voice sentences in the document, will be displayed at the end of the spell check. It looks like this:



Americans' Healthcare Freedom Reconciliation Act of 2015 by a vote of 52-47.

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#### Readability Statistics

Counts	
Words	539
Characters	2824
Paragraphs	5
Sentences	27

Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	5.4
Words per Sentence	20.0
Characters per Word	5.1

Readability	
Passive Sentences	0%
Flesch Reading Ease	40.7
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	12.0

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## Which readability tests are best?

All readability tests will alert you to a problem, but readability and health literacy experts prefer two tests: the SMOG and the Fry Readability test. Both can be done by hand, and the SMOG is particularly quick to do by hand (instructions are available online). There are websites that allow you to run some of these tests, including the Fry.

## What size sample of text do I need to run a readability test?

Different tests recommend different sample sizes, but the bigger the excerpt the more valid your results will be. In general, run your readability test on a sample of at least 300 words or 30 sentences. Use a sample that is somewhat representative of the entire text. Include only full sentences, not headings or lists, in your sample.

## I've done my best to make the document readable, but I'm still getting a high grade level. What should I do now?

Edit your document again or ask someone to edit it for you. Try to make the sentences clearer and shorter. But avoid making the sentences choppy and disconnected just to make the test come out the way you want it to. That defeats the purpose.

When you write about a topic that has a big word in it (for example, *eligibility* or *accountable*) and you have to use the word repeatedly, you will get a higher score. Try running the test without the word and use the score from that test.

In the end, it's the actual readability – not the score – that matters.