

# Keep It Simple For the Biggest Punch

## *By Will Newman*

As a beginning copywriter, you're encouraged to edit your own copy until it's tight. But, what do we mean by "tight copy?"

Tight copy uses the least number of words to get your idea across. It's easy to understand. It's conversational and natural sounding. And, it doesn't contain glitches that make your reader stop, scratch his head, and wonder what you meant.

In short, tight copy is readable. Readability isn't the only quality of tight writing, but it's one of the most crucial. If your writing isn't easy to read, it gets tossed.

## Science Proves: Lower is Better

Scientific research has found that our brains are hardwired to *trust* simpler things. Simpler writing doesn't work better just because it's easier to read. It works better because *it's more believable*.

New writers resist writing simply. They feel they've got to dazzle their readers with how brilliant they are. They want to sound impressive. So, they use complex sentences and big words.

It's not their fault. We've all been educated to believe complexity is a sign of intelligence. And so, they complicate their writing.

But, this couldn't be further from the truth. Great fiction embraces the secret of simplicity. Take a look at these familiar titles with their estimated reading grade level (3.4 means 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 4<sup>th</sup> month):

- *Of Mice and Men* – 3.4
- *Gone with the Wind* – 7.0
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* – 5.9
- *Lord of the Flies* – 4.5
- *1984* – 6.1
- *Brave New World* – 7.2
- *The Road* (2007 Pulitzer Prize winner) – 4.4

A 7th grader can easily read the most complex of these great works!

Readability is crucial in copywriting as well. *Plague of the Black Debt* is one of the most successful book-a-logs in direct-marketing history. It mailed over 14 million pieces, generating more than \$7 million in revenues.

In it, Master Copywriter Lee Euler covered a very complex subject without making his writing complex. His writing averaged just 6.8.

## A Simple Tool to Home in on Readability

Copywriting succeeds when it's believable. If it's not readable, it loses credibility. It won't get read.

So, wouldn't it be nice if you had a tool to tell you how readable your writing is?

There is: the Flesch-Kincaid (FK) Readability Test. FK is a computerized tool that rates reading ease, expressing it as a grade level.

An FK Grade Level of 5.0 or below is very easy to read. A rating of 10.0 or above is very difficult to read. A score between 5.0 and 10.0 is what you'll find in most newspapers and magazines. As a copywriter, you should shoot for an FK between 5 and 8.

MS Word comes with the FK test built in to its grammar checker. Check in Word's Help menu to find out how to turn on the FK test.

If you're on a Mac and don't use Word, download the free software called "Word Counter" from <http://www.supermagnus.com/mac/index.html>. This small application gives you the same information, and you can use it for any Mac word processor.

## Understanding the Statistics

After you run your spelling/grammar check in Word, a box pops up with three divisions: Counts, Averages, and Readability.

Some copywriters make the mistake of only looking at the Readability section. These numbers tell you how easy or hard your copy is to read. But, they don't tell you what's giving you a high score if you get one. So, you need to look at all the sections.

Here's the breakdown of what each of these has:

### **Counts:**

This section gives the number of words, characters, paragraphs, and sentences in your document.

### **Averages:**

The middle section tells the following: Number of sentences per paragraph, words per sentence, and characters per word. This section is the heart of your readability stats.

Here's why: The more characters per word, the longer the word and the harder your copy is to read. The more words per sentence, the more complicated your sentences are ... and harder to understand. The more sentences per paragraph your copy has, the denser it looks ... and the more uninviting it is to read.

### ***Readability:***

The bottom section gives you the Percentage of Passive Sentences, the Flesch Reading Ease (which you can ignore), and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level.

Passive sentences: Many copywriters — including me — write too many passive sentences. These are sentences where the doer of the action comes after the verb. "The ball was hit by the boy." Passive sentences deaden your copy. So, you want to keep the percentage low. I'll tell you how in a future *Golden Thread*.

The other important number in this section is the FK Grade Level, which should be between 5 and 8.

Here's a warning: Your FK level is important, but it's *only* a tool. The most important part of "readability" is this: Is your copy compelling? Does it hit your prospect's core complex and make him want to act?

A piece of copy with an FK of 5.9 that doesn't do these things will fail just as quickly (or more quickly) as one with an FK of 13.2.

In the next couple of weeks, we're going to look at how to tighten your writing. This will both lower your FK and make your copy more compelling.

My FK score for this note? 6.3 with 1% passive sentences.

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# 8 Responses to "Keep It Simple For the Biggest Punch"

So true, passive writing gets you no where but back to the drawing board with editors. Three years of editing team papers in business school projects, I was always amazed at how no one got this. The art of writing in active voice is a must for keeping word count down while creating a great paper or essay when it becomes a part of your style.

*Cheryl Davis* – over a year ago

Is there a link on the AWAI site that allows you to download the Flesch-Kincaid score? I would like to use this tool for all my upcoming assignments with the companion series to the accelerated copywriting program.

Thanks!

*Amy* – over a year ago

Hello, does the Flesch-Kincaid (FK) Readability Test works only for text in english or in german to?

Because I´m from German.

*Heribert* – over a year ago

Hi Will,

I use Readability-Score.com for getting the FK and other text stats - it's totally free.

I put your article through it and got:

FK Grade Level 4.5

I wonder why it's a different score than yours?

Apart from the FK Grade-Level Score...

I aim for Words per Sentence (avge.) of 10 or less...

And Syllables per Word (avge.) of 1.5 or less.

Thanks for your helpful posts and articles.

Mike

*Mike Searles* – over a year ago

**Hi Mike,**

**The difference in FK that you got and mine is the nature of the tool one uses. As long as it's below the magic goal of 8, then I'm not concerned.**

**Thanks for taking the time to run this through Readability-Score. I'll check it out.**

**Will**

*Will Newman* – over a year ago

Super thanks Will.

The bottom line takeaway from your excellent article is this: What gets measured, gets improved.

FK Level in MS-Word: 6.2

*Myles* – over a year ago

Thanks for the info. I didn't even know this existed! I use a program called Grammarly to check for sentence structure, passive writing, style, and plagiarism and run all my work through it before submitting.

This added feature makes a lot of sense and I will now start using it.

Thanks again,

S J Long

*S J Long* – over a year ago

**Hello SJ,**

**I'm pleased to have added to your writer's tool box.**

**Thank you for commenting.**

**Good luck, best wishes, and much success,**

**Will**

*Will Newman* – over a year ago

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