The Secret Behind Kid Books and Copywriting Success
By Will Newman

I have a confession.

I haven't read a book on the current adult fiction bestseller list for over 15 years.

In fact, I seldom read adult fiction. Instead, I read what's called young adult (or YA) fiction.

I used to tell myself I read YA books because I wanted to recommend books to the 6th, 7th, and 8th graders I work with at our elementary school. But I was lying to myself.

I read YA fiction because there are far more good books in this genre than in adult books.

But that's not the only reason I read YA books. There's a secret to them that's ideal for copywriters. You see, these books grab the reader's attention immediately. The stories are honest and compelling. Ideas are clearly stated. No words are wasted.

And, the books are readable. No young person is going to wade through text with long words, complex sentence structures, and massive blocks of text.

In other words, good YA fiction exhibits all the characteristics of readability your copy should have.

We talked about readability's essential importance in copywriting last week. Successful copywriting is readable. And I know you want your copy to be readable.

Here's the rub. You often write in a vacuum … at least until you submit copy to a client. Since you wrote your copy, it *feels* readable to you. But, how can you tell it *is* readable?

The secret weapon of successful copywriters …

Fortunately, there's a tool to check objectively if your copy is readable:The Flesch-Kincaid (FK) Readability Test. FK is a computerized tool that rates reading ease. It gives several different scores, but the most useful is the FK Grade Level score.

The FK checks the number of characters per word, the number of words per sentence, and the number of sentences in a paragraph.

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.

Articles in newspapers and magazines score between 5.0 and 10.0. Mark Ford advises that, as a copywriter, you should shoot for an FK between 5 and 8.

Where to find this handy tool …

MS Word (both Windows and Mac) comes with the FK test built into its spelling/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, you can download free software called "Word Counter" from http://www.supermagnus.com/mac/index.html. This small application gives you a lot of different readability data. The only score you need to worry about is FK Grade Level.

Or, you can do readability testing online at www.readability-score.com.

So, you run your test and get an FK Grade Level score. What do you do with that information? If your grade level is above 8.0, it's time to look at what's causing your score to be too high.

Three strategies to slash your FK …

In Word, the "Averages" part of Readability Stats holds the key to lowering your score. Let's look at these averages to see how to use them to your advantage.

Characters per word

"Characters per word" shows if your words are too long. Shorter words are *usually* better than longer words.

Many high school kids run to a thesaurus to find fancy words. I do the opposite. When I'm writing, long words often come to mind first. I don't slow my writing to think of better choices. I do that when I edit. That's where a good thesaurus comes in. Use yours to search for shorter words to replace longer ones.

For instance, instead of "domicile," choose "house." Instead of "vehicle," choose "car" or "truck."

Choose more common words, even if they're longer. For example, use "criticize" (3 syllables) instead of "decry" (2 syllables). This change will *not* lower FK, but your reader will appreciate it.

When choosing shorter or more common words, do *not* sacrifice precision. Your words must mean what you want. For example, I could have written "give up" instead of "sacrifice." (Using two one-syllable words for one three-syllable word is

usually a good choice). But, I wanted the idea behind "sacrifice" that "give up" doesn't carry.

Words per sentence

When you're editing and come across a longish sentence, use Bob Bly's Breath Test. Inhale normally (not a deep, swimmer's breath). Read the sentence out loud. The sentence is too long if you struggle to finish in one breath.

Rewrite sentences to break them into two (or three) smaller ones. Fragment sentences are fine. If they sound conversational. (Like these.)

Get rid of *all* semicolons (;). My personal rule: Semicolons have no place in direct marketing. A complex sentence with a semicolon is nothing more than two sentences stuck together. Chop it in two.

Eliminate unneeded words like "that," "the," "if," and any others you can remove *without* changing meaning or conversational tone. Use words like "many" for wordier phrases like "a lot of," or "must" for "have to."

Shorten words per sentence using contractions: "you'll" for "you will," and so forth. Using contractions also adds to your conversational tone.

If you can't break a sentence into two and still have it sound reasonable, use ellipses (…) and dashes (–). Using these won't lower your FK, but they'll make your copy more readable.

A good strategy for finding the FK when using ellipses or dashes is this …

Break longer sentence into two sentences with the last and first words bolded. After running the readability test, go back and put ellipses and dashes in between the bolded words.

Sentences per paragraph

Of all your fixes, this is the easiest. With very rare exceptions, you should never have paragraphs longer than six <u>lines</u>. If you're writing web copy, that absolute limit shrinks to four.

<u>*The*</u> cardinal rule of editing …

Don't bog down your creativity by trying to follow these rules while writing. When you're writing … *write*.

Do your first FK check *after* you've written a major section or the entire piece. That's when you go back over what you've written to tighten it and make it more readable.

By the way, the FK of this article is 6.2.

Tell me what you're thinking …

We've talked a lot about the crucial importance of having readable copy these past two weeks. Do you have other strategies for making your writing more readable than I've listed? We'd all love to hear about them. Tell us in the comment section below.

I'll see you next week. And, until then … keep writing!

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12 Responses to "The Secret Behind Kid Books and Copywriting Success"

Excellent suggestions, Will! My federal clients love long sentences, sometimes encompassing 5-6 lines! Still, wherever I can get away with it (smile), I shrink them somewhat trying to balance short, choppy sentences with the paragraph-long ones. So I love to write conversational pieces with short sentences, short paragraphs, and CONTRACTIONS! So refreshing.

no-more-excuses-Deb – over a year ago

Good reminder Will. It's strange how one project will result in a reasonable FK score. And then...

I just did some copy for a nootropic. Try as hard as I could the FK score stayed stubbornly high. It was in the ingredient list and trying to explain what each does.

It'll likely become easier with time and practice. But this last one surprised and humbled me.

David Tomen – over a year ago

Will, I teach middle schoolers grades 6-8. I adore reading good, new YA fiction! This is so helpful to me.....it makes so much sense!

Joyce H – over a year ago

The FK test sounds like a great idea but the help on Word hasn't heard of it.

Guest (margaret) – over a year ago

Will has the answer for FK on a Mac.

It is ... www.readability-score.com.

If you insert your copy into their form, FK grades it instantly!

At last, FK on a MacBook Pro !

Nicole T Bergstrom – over a year ago

I spent 25 years as a technical writer in the IT industry doing software documentation. I learned the following lesson about stating conditions first, both in computer code and straightforward English.

When your sentence includes a condition or limitation, put it in logical sequence. State the limitation first then let the rest of the sentence flow freely.
For example, in this article the sentence...
"The sentence is too long if you struggle to finish in one breath."
...would be more readable as:
"if you struggle to finish in one breath, the sentence is too long."

Guest (Michael Kerr) – over a year ago

Will-

I was a children's writer and am very familiar with the F-K score. Usually I keep it quite low. But I'm writing web pages for highly technical products for start-up companies. Here I find it really hard to keep a low FK score. I did lower one page (someone else had written) from 21 to 12... but 12? Sigh. I've had to accept 10.5. But I'd love pointers to get it lower.

Sandy Fox – over a year ago

Thank you ALL for taking the time to comment on this article. I'm pleased it makes sense to you.

Margaret: Please contact me through member services at AWAI and I will give you some guidance about FK.

Joyce H: If you also contact me through member services, I'd love to exchange favorite FK titles.

Best wishes,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

Hi Sandy,

It can be difficult lowering the FK on technically-oriented copy. The problem is that some of the words you have to use will boost the FK tremendously. One strategy is to take every absolutely necessary long tech term and assign it a substitute. For example, elasmobranches could EEE. After doing that using separate substitutes for each different long word, run your FK. (Use find & replace.) This gives a true FK. If your FK is still high, then work on changing sentence length and finding simpler ways of expressing yourself. I hope this helps.

Best wishes,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

BEING NEW TO AWAI, THIS SHOWS THAT "SIMPLE," THOUGH NOT ALWAYS "EASY," IS ALWAYS WISER.

HARRISON – over a year ago

GREAT STUFF! Maybe there we can form groups to keep us motivated.

Guest (melvin) – over a year ago

Thank you, Harrison and Melvin, for your comments.

Forming a support/motivation group is an excellent idea. If you're in Circle of Success, you can do it with your Circle or on the Groupsite. If you're not in COS, then go to the AWAI forum and seek out motivation partners.

Good luck, best wishes, and much success,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago