Can You Read Me?

By Joesph Lopez

Legibility and readability are matters of taste and skill.

Legibility and readability often present themselves as an invisible union, difficult to delineate in actual reading just as you are doing now. Confused? Do not be alarmed. Many people feel the same way.

  Legibility refers to appearance, to how easily a typeset text can be read, as in an eye exam. What matters here is the size and presentation of the printed or displayed text. Quick test: Can you visually recognize the letters you are looking at?

  Readability, in contrast, refers to the mental processing of meaningful sentences, the ease with which written language is read and understood. It pertains to the difficulty of the content or the language incorporating factors like sentence and word lengths and the frequency of uncommon words. Quick test: Did you understand what you just read? The two processes are lightning seconds apart—you see the characters first, then you assign meaning and gain overall comprehension of the phrase or sentence. It follows that text can be legible but not readable. However copy, in order to be readable, must first be legible.

Legibility

  Previous studies on legibility have led to commonly agreed findings:

- o Text set in lower case is more legible than text set all in UPPER CASE
- o Comparative studies of seriffed vs. sans serif type, or justified vs. unjustified type, have not been conclusive on which is best;
- o The presence of (ascenders, descenders and other projecting parts) makes characters easier to identify;
- o Regular upright type (roman) is found to be easier to read than *italics*;
- o Color contrast creates saliency, as in black on yellow or cream;
- o Positive images (e.g. black on white) are easier to read than negative or reversed images (e.g. white on black);
- o The upper portions of letters play a stronger part than the lower portions in the recognition process.

  Legibility is also affected by letterspacing spacing and Leading that are too tight or too loose. To make it easier for the eye to distinguish one line from the next, there must be sufficient vertical space separating lines of text or horizontal space, for vertical texts such as Chinese.

  Situational contexts can affect typeface legibility. For example, if copy has a lot of numerals, a sans serif font may be easier to process because the letters are simpler and surrounded by more white space, making

them softer to recognize than their roman counterparts.

Other design features that can affect legibility include medium, layout and illustrations.

These days, legibility research tends to be limited to the testing of new typefaces for specific scenarios such as copy for people with visual impairment, highway signs or for other situations where font clarity plays a greater role than normal.

Another valuation of legibility is reading speed, not comprehension, but by rate of sight word reading or spelling-sound association.

Readability

Readability is a result of writing style, involving semantics, sentence structure, grammar, use of punctuation and paragraphing, just to name a few. Good copy affects comprehension, retention, and subconsciously (as does legibility) contributes to reading speed. Remember that invisible union?

Clearly, an article's readability depends on the reader's level of education or exposure and frequency of reading, as well as interest and motivation.

Writers and publishers use readability formulas to come up with a quick score that can give a rough estimate of the reading skill required to understand a text. Some of the more popular measures of readability are:

- o [Automated Readability Index](#)
- o [Coleman-Liau](#)
- o [Flesch Reading Ease](#)
- o [Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level](#)
- o [Gunning Fog](#)

In all cases, the number of syllables or characters per word, and the number of sentences are counted. The more syllables or characters per word, and the longer the sentences, the higher the degree of difficulty or grade level.

Of course, there is the anomaly of a very complex monosyllabic word or short sentence or both. Most scores are based on a per 100 word sample. How many paragraphs can possibly contain a preponderance of such anomalies and still be intelligible?

There are many computer programs for measuring the readability of text in languages other than English. Some are available via [websites](#), and some of these are specifically designed to measure the readability of web pages. Your word processing software, more often than not MSWord, has a built-in text readability gauge. Just go to the Menu bar, click on Tools, scroll down to Options, then select Spelling and Grammar.

In addition to readability formulas, publishers also use word-frequency lists and text leveling, a subjective evaluation of a text based on training and experience. Most of today's bestselling fiction (such as that by John Grisham, Stephen King and J. K. Rowling) is written at the 7th-grade level. Legal and health information is usually written at the 7th-grade level, while in the United States, by law, medical and safety information must be at the 5th-grade level.

Taste and skill

In today's supermall of layout designs, legibility is a question of taste [and design competence]. But writing comprehensible text for audiences of different grade levels or cultural contexts requires agility in composition skills.

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