

Simple & Plain English

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READABLE ENGLISH

Readable English, or plain English, is a level of language that is easily grasped by the target audience. Martin Cutts hesitates to define, rather prefers to describe plain English in these words:

The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a co-operative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the document at first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood (*The Plain English Guide* 3).

The language of children's magazines, such as *Chandamama* and *Gokulam*, is different from that of news magazines, such as *Frontline* and *India Today*. Yet we can say that, in both cases, the language is readable provided it fulfils certain readability standards.

There are three dimensions to readability: 1. word choice; 2. sentence type; and 3. text structure. Each of these dimensions is wholly dependent on what the writer wants to communicate, and to whom. Let us look at all these dimensions.

Word choice

Words may be classified under different heads: short, familiar, concrete and precise. Short words, monosyllabic and disyllabic, are easy to read. Hence in Robert Gunning's Fog Index, word difficulty is measured by the percentage of polysyllabic words. He points out that in the Dale list of 3000 familiar words, only four percent of words are polysyllabic (*The Technique Of Clear Writing* 283). If all the words are familiar in a document, the readers are at ease. They don't have to look into a dictionary every now and then. Concrete words are words that are not abstract. George Orwell, in 'Politics And The English Language', takes a concrete verse from *Ecclesiastes* and clothes them in abstract terms to demonstrate that abstract words make a text unreadable (*Outlooks And Insights* 488). Precise words, if difficult, must be explained by the writers when they are writing for a non-specialised audience. If they are addressing a specialized audience on a technical subject, precision cannot be compromised. But in newspapers and magazines, even in technical articles, the writers must make it a point to simplify technical points for the readers.

Sir Ernest Gowers suggests three rules in the choice of words:

"Use no more words than are necessary to express your meaning, for if you use more you are likely to obscure it and tire your reader. In particular do not use superfluous adjectives and adverbs, and do not use roundabout phrases where single words would serve.

Use familiar words rather than the far-fetched, if they express your meaning equally well; for the familiar are more likely to be readily understood.

Use words with a precise meaning rather than those that are vague, for they will obviously serve better to make your meaning clear; and in particular, prefer concrete words to abstract, for they are more likely to have a precise meaning." (*The Complete Plain Words* 81-82)

Gowers goes on to elaborate these rules with examples. Those who wish to write readable English must heed his words.

Sentence type

Words combine to form sentences of various types. The basic types are based on the number and the nature of the clauses. Thomas S. Kane discusses the simple, compound, complex and the compound-complex sentences (*The New Oxford Guide To Writing* 116-117). Though all these types are readable, we need to know which type is most suitable in a given context. A feature article written only in simple sentences may be monotonous; and a report only in compound-complex sentences may be tedious.

These types generate what Kane calls sentence styles (*The New Oxford Guide To Writing* 119-139). They are the segregating, the freight-train, the cumulative, the parallel, the balanced, the subordinating and the fragment styles. Kane explains when each of these styles will be effective and when they fail to be so. The subordinating style is of much interest because it helps to show the degrees of significance of ideas in a sentence. Kane identifies four types:

1. Loose structure: the main clause comes first and is followed by the subordinate clauses and phrases.
2. Periodic structure: the subordinate constructions precede the main clause, which closes the sentence.
3. Convoluted structure: the main clause is split in two, opening and closing the sentence; the subordinate constructions intrude between the parts of the main clause.
4. Centered structure: the main clause occupies the middle of the sentence and is both preceded and followed by subordinate constructions.

A readable text can consist of all these types. A sentence of any type is readable provided it is structured on the principles of concision, emphasis, rhythm and variety. Kane has devoted separate chapters for each of these principles (*The New Oxford Guide To Writing* 140-174). Here follow some of his essential quotes:

Concision: Concision is brevity relative to purpose. It is not to be confused with absolute brevity. A sentence of seven words is brief; but if the idea can be conveyed with equal clarity in five, the sentence is not concise. On the other hand, a sentence of fifty words is in no sense brief, but it is concise if the point can be made in no fewer words (140).

Emphasis: Emphatic sentences are only occasionally needed. But it is usually necessary to establish appropriate emphasis upon particular words within the sentence. Good writers do this subtly. Rather than scattering exclamation points, underlinings, and capitals, they rely chiefly upon the selection and positioning of words (154).

Rhythm: Rhythm is effective when it pleases the ear. Even more important, good rhythm enters into what a sentence says, enhancing and reinforcing its meaning. A necessary condition of effective rhythm is that a passage be laid out in clear syntactic units (phrases, clauses, whole sentences); that these have something in common (length, intonation, grammatical structure); and that there be a loose but discernible pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Generally the syntactic units, while showing some similarities, are very far from exactly the same. Nor are the syllables laid out in precisely repeated patterns. In this respect prose rhythm is much looser than that of traditional accented poetry, which has a much more predictable arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables (164).

Variety: *Recurrence* means repeating a basic sentence pattern. *Variety* means changing the pattern. Paradoxical as it sounds, good sentence style must do both. Enough sameness must appear in the sentences to make the writing seem all of a piece; enough difference to create interest (171).

Besides these principles, there are other guidelines for readable English. Some of these, as found in William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's book *The Elements Of Style*, are: Use the active voice; Put statements in positive form; Express coordinate ideas in similar form; and, Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.

Text structure

A document may be written in simple language comprising familiar words, and yet may be unreadable because of the way the information is organized. Martin Cutts says that readers ask two questions with every sentence that they read. "So what? How does this affect me?" He points out that answering these questions in plain words and short sentences won't always make the text readable. What is required is that the material should be organized in such a way that helps readers to grasp the important information early and to navigate through the document easily. He discusses 10 models: 1. Top-heavy triangle; 2. Problem-Cause-Solution; 3. Chronological order; 4. Questions and answers; 5. S-C-R-A-P (Situation, Complication, Resolution, Action, Politeness); 6. S-O-A-P (Situation, Objective, Appraisal, Proposal); 7. PARbox memos (Purpose, Action requested, Response required); 8. The 5P's (Position, Problem, Possibilities, Proposal, Packaging); 9. Correspondent's order; and, 10. Full-dress report (*The Plain English Guide* 108-117).

Not all these models are found in the mass media. The top-heavy triangle is better known as the inverted pyramid. In this structure, points in a news story are arranged in the order of diminishing significance. A good news story usually answers the 5W's and 1 H (Who, What, Why, Where, When and How). Rudyard Kipling sets this in rhyme:

*I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.
I send them over land and sea,
I send them east and west;
But after they have worked for me,
I give them all a rest. (Just So Stories 30)*

News reports answer the 5W's and 1 H in the order of importance. The inverted pyramid structure is thus indispensable in breaking the news.

The Problem-Cause-Solution is the typical structure of the formula editorials. Chronological narratives are rare in newspapers. Interviews are in the questions and answers format.

The other models are more suited for business writing than for news writing. Martin Cutts ends his chapter on reader-centered structure with these words:

Unless you are a novelist, poet or journalist, your writing will rarely be the highlight of a busy reader's day — but then it's not meant to be. Your main aim is to help readers to achieve their objectives which are, to put it bluntly, to Get In, Get On and Get Out. In other words, to access the information readily, make progress through it quickly and finish reading as soon as possible. Lucid language and structure will help them to do so, and that can only be good for your reputation as a clear thinker (117).

Martin Cutts is right, but we need to strike a note of caution. Even if you are a journalist, and even if your writing is the highlight of a busy reader's day, your aim must still be to help the readers Get In, Get On and Get Out.

Ten principles

Robert Gunning did much research in readability and arrived at ten principles of clear writing. In his own words:

Keep Sentences Short. For easy reading, sentences should vary in structure and length but, on the average, should be short.

Prefer the Simple to the Complex. Many complex terms are unnecessary. When there is a simpler way of saying a thing, use it. Avoid complex sentences.

Develop Your Vocabulary. Don't let preference for short words limit your vocabulary. Intelligence and vocabulary size are closely linked; you need long words to think with.

Avoid Unneeded Words. Nothing weakens writing so much as extra words. Be critical of your own writing and make every word carry its weight.

Put Action Into Your Verbs. The heaviness of much business writing results from overworking the passive verbs. Prose can usually be kept impersonal and remain in the active tenses.

Use Terms Your Reader Can Picture. Abstract terms make writing dull and foggy. Choose short, concrete words that the reader can visualize.

Tie In With Your Reader's Experience. The reader will not get your new idea unless you link it with some old idea he already has.

Write the Way You Talk. Well, anyway, as much that way as you can. A conversational tone is one of the best avenues to good writing. Avoid stuffy business jargon. In letters, use "we" and "you" freely.

Make Full Use of Variety. Use as many different arrangements of words and sentences as you can think up, but be sure your meaning is clear.

Write To Express, Not To Impress. Present your ideas simply and directly. The writer who makes the best impression is the one who can express complex ideas simply. "Big men use little words; little men use big words." (*How To Take The Fog Out Of Writing* 8)

He discusses these principles in a different order in *The Technique Of Clear Writing*. Some of the principles also have a different nomenclature. But that need not unduly worry us. We need to remember that these principles are guidelines and not rules. He himself points this out:

Clear writing is an art. It can't be encased in a set of rules, because rules are a substitute for thought and you can't write well without thinking. On the other hand, the principles set forth here should serve as a useful guide to clear thinking and clear writing (*How To Take The Fog Out Of Writing* 8).

Martin Cutts, who has evolved 20 guidelines for plain English, elaborates this point:

I say guidelines, not rules. There is a guideline to aim for an average sentence length of 15-20 words in a document, but there is no rule prohibiting sentences of more than 20 words. There is a guideline to use words your readers are likely to understand, but there is no rule prohibiting technical terms (*The Plain English Guide* 2).

Writing myths

Martin Cutts identifies seven writing myths and offers the guideline: "Avoid being enslaved by writing myths." He says that sentences can begin with 'but', 'so', 'because', 'and', 'however' and such transitional terms. He shows with examples that a comma can be placed before 'and'. He points out that infinitives can be split, sentences can end with prepositions and one-sentence paragraphs may be written. What he says cannot be disputed, but what he calls myths 6 and 7 need to be clarified.

Myth 6: You should write as you speak. This runs counter to Gunning's principle 'Write the way you talk'. First let us hear Martin Cutts:

True, many writers would benefit from making their writing more conversational, using more personal pronouns and active verbs. But this is not the same as writing as you speak. Most of us don't speak in complete sentences — a transcript of our talk usually reads as gibberish on the page. Plain English is much more than speech transcribed; it is speech organized, worked and refined (*The Plain English Guide* 97).

Now, let us listen to Robert Gunning:

Of course, you can't write exactly what you might say. For one thing, most of us talk rather untidy English. We repeat ourselves — thinking out loud — seeking the best way to frame our thoughts in words. Still, a brushed-up spoken version is usually far easier reading than a formal version (*The Technique Of Clear Writing* 120).

What one writer calls a myth, the other calls a principle. But both are driving at the same point. Unorganized speech is always unreadable in the journalistic context — in literature we have the eminently readable though ungrammatical *Huckleberry Finn*. A formal version, even if it is readable,

is not better than human speech 'brushed-up'. Even in 1893, L.A. Sherman wrote in favor of the spoken word:

Literary English, in short, will follow the forms of the standard spoken English from which it comes. No man should talk worse than he writes, no man writes better than he should talk.... The oral sentence is clearest because it is the product of millions of daily efforts to be clear and strong. It represents the work of the race for thousands of years in perfecting an effective instrument of communication (DuBay 12).

Stephen Leacock, with characteristic humour, shows us the difference between the spoken and the written word:

Ebenezer Smith, let us say, writes from Temagami camp a letter to a friend. Hitherto he has just written letters straight off, after this fashion: *We got the canoes into the water about five o'clock just after the sun rose. The lake was dead calm and we paddled down to the portage in half an hour. I never saw the lake so calm.* But suddenly Ebenezer becomes sophisticated and when he sits down to write, the result is such a passage as this:

A clear morning with just a faint sheen of mist before the sun kissed it away. I watched it vanish from the still surface of the lake and thought it seemed like some thin cerement, reverently drawn from the still face of death — Oh, no, you didn't, Ebenezer. You thought that afterwards: stick to the canoe and portage stuff. It's more like Xenophon (How To Write 23).

This supports the fact that 'write as you speak' is not a myth but a principle. We shall now consider the seventh 'myth' and Martin Cutts's debatable advice:

Myth 7: You should test your writing with a readability formula.

Several software grammar-checkers claim to measure the readability of writing under such names as FOG (frequency of gobbledygook) Index and the Flesch Test. Generally such formulas use only two variables to get their results: sentence length and word length. The score is then compared to a reading age level (UK) or grade level (US), and, hey presto, a scientific result is produced. Yet the formulas disregard such things as the use of actives and passives, the way the information is organized, how it looks on the page, and the reader's motivation and level of prior knowledge. They give only the merest hint about how to write a text better, and they encourage the idea that a clear document is one that scores well on a formula. Few serious writers bother to use them. Have fun with formulas by all means — surprise your bosses with an evaluation of their writing, perhaps — but then forget about them (*The Plain English Guide* 98).

Quantitative aspect

Readable English has two aspects: qualitative and quantitative. Obviously the qualitative aspect is more important than the quantitative. But this is not to say that the quantitative aspect can be completely ignored. In 1893 appeared L.A. Sherman's book titled *Analytics of Literature, A Manual for the Objective Study of English Prose and Poetry*. He was the first to statistically analyse readability. Writes William H. Dubay:

He (Sherman) noticed a progressive shortening of sentences over time. He decided to look at this statistically and began by counting average sentence length per 100 periods. In his book (1893), *Analytics of Literature, A Manual for the Objective Study of English Prose and Poetry*, he showed how sentence-length averages shortened over time:

Pre-Elizabethan times: 50 words per sentence

Elizabethan times: 45 words per sentence

Victorian times: 29 words per sentence

Sherman's time: 23 words per sentence.

In our time, the average is down to 20 words per sentence (*The Principles of Readability* 11).

Writes Robert Gunning:

Dr. L.A. Sherman was the first to spend much effort counting sentences. Working at the University of Nebraska in the 1890s he determined such prose averages as these for English writers: Milton, 60.80 words per sentence; Spenser, 49.82; Defoe, 68; Thomas More, 52; Dryden, 45.26 (*The Technique Of Clear Writing* 51).

It is true that a majority of writers don't test their writing with a readability formula. Even Robert Gunning says that writers should not write to a formula:

But, while the Fog Index is handy for judging readability, it is not a formula for how to write. Don't feel that you have written clearly just because your Fog Index is low. Anyone could put together a mumbo jumbo of short words in short sentences that would convey nothing at all to the reader (*How To Take The Fog Out Of Writing* 13).

Nevertheless, the quantitative element plays a significant role in the writing process. When Robert Gunning was first introduced to a readability yardstick, he was furious. His articles, tested by the Vogel-Washburne formula, were found to be too difficult for the target audience. In the preface to *The Technique Of Clear Writing*, he writes:

In anger, I drafted a scathing rebuttal. But, as I wrote, I found myself giving closer attention to the mechanics of my prose. Sentences were held in check and not allowed to ramble. Each word I weighed carefully, favoring the simple ones. The warning of the yardstick people was taking effect. I had to admit they were influencing me to improve my writing for the sake of readers (xiii-xiv).

The analysis of plain English must first begin by addressing the qualitative aspect. Robert Gunning's ten principles of clear writing serve as useful reminders to writers.

A text that fulfils the tenets of grammar, style and content may then be subjected to quantitative analysis. It must always be remembered that a readability formula does not say whether a text is readable or not, rather indicates the reading age level or grade of a readable document. But if qualitatively it has been found that a text is readable or not, then the formula's score may be taken to confirm the finding.

Grammar guides

A sentence that is ungrammatical can still be readable. But this is not to say that we can dismiss grammar from any discussion of plain English. The question is how much grammar a writer ought to know. Writes Robert Gunning:

The suggestion that, in general, you can cease to worry about rules of grammar will not apply if you tend to write "We ain't got no ..." or "He don't ..." But most people who are expected to write in business and industry have developed beyond such barbarisms. Instead, they worry about such matters as the split infinitive and avoidance of prepositions at the ends of sentences. Such *supposed* rules are mostly nonsense. Writers of good English have ignored them, when they wished, from the beginning of the language.

Nearly anyone who has read this far will be safe in following these two simple guides to good grammar:

ONE: Write what you have to say as simply and directly as possible.

TWO: Examine it to make sure the reader cannot make something out of your message that you didn't intend (*How To Take The Fog Out Of Writing* 49).

Writers, even if they follow these two simple guides, need to have a smattering of grammar if they wish to write coherently. The following points of grammar may be noted:

1. Subject-verb agreement
2. Pronoun-antecedent agreement
3. Sequence of tenses

We shall now look at a few examples of readable English from the print media. These are the lead paragraphs from newspapers and magazines that appeared around New Year 2006.

Advani resigns as BJP president

By Neena Vyas

MUMBAI: Lal Krishna Advani resigned as Bharatiya Janata Party president on Saturday and formally declared that his successor would be Rajnath Singh. The new chief would take charge at the BJP headquarters in New Delhi on January 2 (*The Hindu*, 1 January 2006)

Advani's sun sets with 2005

Express News Service

Mumbai, Dec. 31: Rajnath Singh was formally declared the new president of the BJP on Saturday even as L.K. Advani made it clear that though he was stepping down as party chief, he had no intention of taking sanyas — a la A.B. Vajpayee — from active politics anytime soon. Addressing a press conference, Advani said he was confident that Rajnath Singh “will preside over the party's growth to newer heights” and that the bad “patch” faced by the BJP in 2005 would be followed by “a good patch in 2006.” (*The New Indian Express*, 1 January 2006)

Grave Reminder

By Nandini Oza/LUNAWADA

“You won't understand my problem; I am dying to look at my son's skeleton,” cried Ameenabibi Rasool. “If nothing else, they could have given him a decent burial.” Nearly four years after Gujarat witnessed one of the worst carnages in history, skeletons are literally spilling out of the grave (*The Week*, 8 January 2006).

Dying for relief

By S. Anand

The Bay of Bengal has been so severely under depression over the last three months that it has also plunged the entire people of Tamil Nadu into a state of distress. As the state's rivers, dams, reservoirs and lakes swelled with unprecedented rains abetted by depressions and three cyclonic storms — Baaz, Fanoos and Mala — the administration simply buckled. Worse, the mismanagement of relief operations added to the tragedy of numbers. After 42 people choked to death in the early-morning stampede on December 18 at a relief distribution centre in Chennai, the overall toll in the state had risen to 672 since October 1. Very clearly, the poor response of the administration to the floods will be an election issue when Tamil Nadu goes to the polls in four months' time (*Outlook*, 9 January 2006).

Hopes and fears

By Parvathi Menon

A year has gone by since a tsunami strike changed life irrevocably for people living in the countries of the Indian Ocean rim. The awesome and unforeseen act of nature — the worst natural disaster in living memory — killed nearly three lakh people, altered landmasses, devastated villages and towns, and left millions of shaken survivors traumatized and psychologically scarred (*Frontline*, 13 January 2006).

From the editor-in-chief

Attempting to sum up a whole year in a few words is no mean task. Perforce, it leads to oversimplification, and like all such exercises, is open to questions. Alas, that is the lot of newsmagazine journalism. So, at our peril, we have decided to characterize 2005 as the Year of Cheer. — Aroon Purie (*India Today*, 9 January 2006).

Learn to Laugh

Dear Reader,

Half yearly exams were in full swing and when I saw my neighbour's son Robin come home in the evening I asked him how he had done his exams that day. "Poorly," he said, "I may scrape through!" He giggled (*Gokulam*, January 2006).

Glimpses of the great

We ring in a new year after we ring out a year at the end of twelve months. We do so with all hopes that the new year will augur well for us and those near and dear to us. It is only natural that we tend to look back and recollect the good things that have happened in our lives in the past one year and wish that the darker days which we might have passed through would never come back (*Chandamama*, January 2006).

Creative licence

In a later chapter, we shall offer a quantitative analysis of these magazines and newspapers. If we say that the above passages fulfill certain plain English guidelines and violate others, it is purely a subjective statement. Different editors will edit the same text very differently. But they should keep in mind that all writers have creative licence to fulfill certain guidelines and violate others. This the writers do because of some pressing need to fulfill a higher law that governs the expression of unquantifiable content. Here is the opening sentence of 'Glimpses of the great': "We ring in a new year after we ring out a year at the end of twelve months." This may be rewritten thus: "We ring in the new year and ring out the old." This is shorter and more emphatic with its allusion to Tennyson's 'In Memoriam'. Nevertheless, there is nothing wrong with the original sentence. Remember Lincoln's Gettysburg address? Here is the opening sentence: "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are equal." Robert Gunning hints at the possibility that this sentence can be rewritten thus: "Eighty-seven years ago our fathers brought forth here a new nation, born in liberty, and pledged to the belief that all men are equal." But he is quick to add:

Of course, no one with any feeling for the language would make such changes. Each word Lincoln used was perfect for his purpose. The address is within the easy-reading range with a Fog Index of 10. The mixture of big words is not so rich that it would stall the reader. There are only 7 per cent of polysyllables and only two words out of 267 ("detract" and "nobly") are outside the 10,000 most frequently used (*The Technique Of Clear Writing* 84-85).

Robert Gunning's subjective remarks about Lincoln's qualitative prose is followed by an objective analysis of the quantitative aspect. If we are agreed that Lincoln's speech is readable, it is not because it has a Fog Index of 10. The Fog Index is just an objective confirmation of a subjective viewpoint.