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How to Write Low Literacy Materials

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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE

How to Write Low Literacy Materials

Abstract

This article is a tool for professionals and paraprofessionals who write educational materials for low literacy audiences. The article includes quick tips and a test that measure the reading level of printed materials. The author also points the reader to examples that are easily accessible and can be used when writing for low literacy audiences.

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Extension professionals frequently have to write fact sheets, newsletters, and educational materials that appeal to and are effective with low literacy people. Approximately 40 million Americans age 16 years and older have low literacy skills (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1993). Forty-three percent of people with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty; 17% receive food stamps; and 70% have no job or a part-time job (Family, Career and Community Leaders of America, 2000).

Thus, to help low literacy people understand what they need to know, professionals and paraprofessionals need to be able to write materials at a low literacy level. This article is a guide to assist you in writing low literacy text.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1993), literacy is "...the ability to read, write, and speak in English and compute and solve problems at the levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential." There are three types of literacy skills.

- Prose literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from text.
- Document literacy is the knowledge and skills required to locate and use words and symbols in materials such as job applications, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphs.
- Quantitative literacy is the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed material. Quantitative literacy is needed for balancing a check book and figuring out interest or loans as two examples (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993).

This article addresses prose literacy as it applies to writing text for low literacy audiences.

Low literacy material is text written for people with limited ability to read and write. The text is characterized by easy words and short sentences to accommodate readers who have trouble recognizing letters and understanding hard words. To write low literacy text you need to know your audience and have a feel for the reading capabilities of the group. Once you have determined the reading level of your audience, you should write your educational materials with the needs of your target audience in mind.

Quick Tips for Writing Low Literacy Materials

Many of the tips below should be familiar to you because they hold true for the writing of all types of materials. Others, however, are especially important when you want to reach low literacy audiences.

1. Keep writing style simple.
2. Use active voice and conversational style.
3. Sequence main points in a logical manner.
4. Make your sub-points clearly correspond to the main point.
5. Use short words and sentences.
6. Avoid double negative expressions.
7. Use the same word consistently rather than synonyms to avoid confusion.
8. For lengthy materials, use a table of contents to point the way.
9. Write short summaries at the end of long sections.
10. Use a larger type than 12 points for the text.
11. Enlarge or bold the type in headings and subheadings.
12. Use extra white space to separate sections.
13. Use age appropriate illustrations.
14. Place illustrations close to the related text.
15. Use simple grids, site maps, and other visuals to ease the reading of text.

Testing Reading Level

There are several tests that measure reading level. The Fog Index, developed by Robert Gunning, is easy to understand and requires a minimum amount of text to execute the test. To find the Fog Index of material you have written, follow these steps.

1. Take a sample of approximately 100 words, stopping at the end of the sentence nearest to a 100-word count. Thus, the sample could run from somewhere in the 90's to 104 or so words.

Number of words in the passage: _____

2. Count the number of sentences in the sample: _____

3. Get the average number of words per sentence by dividing the number of words in the sample by the number of sentences in the sample: _____

4. Count the number of polysyllabic words (words with three or more syllables) in the sample. These are considered to be hard words. Count each hard word only the first time it appears in the sample. Omit from this count proper nouns and easy compound words. Also omit from this count any three-syllable words made up of a two-syllable word and one of the following endings: -s, -es, -'s, -ed, -er, -ing, -est, or -ly.

Do count as a hard word any two-syllable words made up of a two-syllable word and one of the following endings: -or, -ier, -iest, or -ily.

Number of hard words: _____

5. Add the average number of words per sentence (#3) to the number of hard words (#4): _____

6. Multiply this sum by .4: _____

Approximate Grade Level of Your Material: _____

Some Good Examples

Good examples of low literacy writing styles are available all around us. The commercial market offers examples of simple text and layout with lots of visuals and white space. Many of the "for Dummies" books show good use of white space, visuals, and short sections of printed text. Also, look for more good examples in junk mail that seeks to get your attention quickly with a simple message.

The "quick tips," the Fog Index, and examples like the ones described above will help you get started in writing low literacy educational materials.

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