



READABILITY

SECRETS

for

**Coaches
Who Write**

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INTRODUCTION

Successful coaches know that well-written communications have the power to build relationships, credibility, trust and sales. As a caring, committed coach, you have great ideas about how to help people in your target market.

When you write, you can coach the whole world.

But if your readers struggle to understand your message or get distracted by mistakes, you'll lose them long before your ideas can do their job. If you want your writing to be read and understood, it must be readable.

This paper will answer:

- ① Why is readability an issue?
- ② Why should you care about readability?
- ③ What are the three main causes of readability problems?
- ④ How can you measure and improve readability?

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Why Is Readability an Issue?

A 2005 survey by Statistics Canada revealed that four out of ten Canadians, or 42%, have serious reading problems (source: The Toronto Star, 2005). In the United States, the National Right to Read Foundation said that 50 million people read no higher than a fourth- or fifth-grade level (source: Education Portal, 2007).

If your writing is too complicated or difficult to read, you risk putting up a barrier between your ideas and the people who need them.

Why Should You Care About Readability?

Simply put, if your work isn't readable, people won't read it!

Let's take article marketing as an example. The premise behind article marketing is that you distribute your articles for free, either online, in your newsletter or both. In exchange, you share some promotional information about your business, either in another section of your newsletter or at the bottom of your article in an author resource box.

Think of the potential! If your readers like what you have to say and see that you know how to solve the problem they have, they're left feeling:

- Encouraged that they've found a solution to their problem
- Grateful that you shared this valuable information (and for free!)
- Curious about the products and services you offer
- Impressed with what you've put together
- Eager to access (and buy) more of your great information

But what if your article has readability problems and is difficult to understand? What if it contains grammar mistakes, typographical errors or jargon? In that case, there's a good chance that they'll abandon it long before they get to your promotional message. Additionally, your readers are left feeling:

- Confused about what to do next
- Frustrated because they aren't finding what they're looking for
- Self-conscious that they're missing something
- Unimpressed (to say the least)
- Repelled by what's making them feel this way

What's worse, the next time they see something from you on the Web or in their Inbox, they might remember that experience and skip past your information, instead of reading what you have to say.

Convinced? Please keep reading.

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What Are the Three Main Causes of Readability Problems?

- 1 You're trying to sound too smart.
- 2 You're trying to say too much.
- 3 You're a great thinker, not a great writer.

Are you trying to sound too smart?

You probably don't realize you're doing it. Your heart is in the right place; you want to help people. But something happens when you put pen to paper or fingertips to keyboard. You start worrying about how smart you sound.

Maybe you feel self-conscious, remembering the red correction marks on your school papers. Maybe you think no one will take you seriously or want to work with you if you don't seem smart enough.

So you inflate your writing with unnecessary words and phrases. Patricia O'Conner, the author of *Woe is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English*, calls these "throat-clearing phrases." Examples include: "It is important to note that ...," and "It is interesting to point out that"

My sister told me early in my writing career that I never needed to use the phrase, "I think that..." at the beginning of a sentence (except maybe in my blog when I'm writing in a more conversational style). She said, "You're the author of the article, of course it's what you think!"

Another phrase to watch for is "in other words." Someone wise taught me that if you're using that phrase, it's because you haven't explained something clearly. Instead of using up precious real estate on your page, go back and explain it properly the first time!

A bit harsh, yes, and I sometimes use these phrases anyway. But it's a good practice to stop and think about why you're using them in the first place.

When writing, you usually want to show that you belong, that you're an insider in your industry. How? You use big words and technical jargon. It's only natural, especially for new coaches who are just starting to use this language. You're excited about the new vision of the world that you're discovering, and you want to invite people into it.

Writing has the power to connect you with your audience of prospective clients, but only if you use language they can relate to. Jargon, big words, and throat-clearing phrases separate you from your reader. And that doesn't make you sound smart at all.

Remember, when you write clearly and effectively, your readers feel encouraged, grateful, curious, impressed and eager. That makes you sound pretty smart!

Are you trying to say too much?

Here's an excerpt from my Idea Generator blog: (October 30, 2007)

When we're excited and passionate about the ideas we have to share, and when we're genuinely concerned with helping other people find solutions, we want to SAY IT ALL.

However, trying to bring together all of those ideas at once can make it very overwhelming for your reader... instead, stick to one main point (with two or three sub-headings) in each article, and then celebrate the fact that you've got content for more articles!

So don't try to write the article of a lifetime. Remember, you have a lifetime to write articles!

The same idea is true for every piece of writing. When you try to say too much, your primary message gets watered down and potentially lost.

Stick to a basic structure in your writing. Ask yourself, "What's the point (of this piece of writing)?" Introduce what you're going to say, make your main point and support it. Then, invite your readers to take an action: ask them to think about, practice or act on the point you've made. Finally, summarize what you've said to wrap it up.

Does everything you've written support your main point? If not, maybe it doesn't belong there.

Are you a great thinker, but not a great writer?

Maybe writing isn't your strong point. You don't like doing it, you have no interest in improving your skills, and you don't like the results you're getting. So you struggle with it, complain about it, plan to do it, avoid doing it, do it, redo it, and worry about it. Phew!

Relax; this is why God made ghostwriters and editors.

At some point, every coach realizes how much time, energy and peace of mind it costs to do everything ourselves. Especially things we're not particularly good at.

If writing isn't your thing, focus on other marketing strategies such as speaking and networking. When something has to be written, such as your website content, hire a ghostwriter or editor to take the pressure off and help get it done. Look for someone who understands the coaching industry and has worked with other coaches.

If you're like some of my clients, this process might inspire you to start writing other things, such as articles, courses, or even books.



Hey, maybe writing is your thing after all!

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How Can You Measure and Improve Readability?

Microsoft Word measures readability using two tests developed by Rudolf Flesch, a well-known readability expert. You can view these measurements from the Spelling and Grammar check. If you're using Word 2007, click the Office Button, then Word Options (bottom right-hand corner), then Proofing. Check the two buttons "check grammar with spelling" and "show readability statistics."

In your results, you'll see the Flesch Reading Ease level, which is based on a 100-point scale. The higher the score, the easier it is to read. A score of 65 or higher qualifies as "Plain English." To compare, Flesch rated consumer ads in magazines at 82, *Reader's Digest* at 65, *Time Magazine* at 52 and a standard auto insurance policy at 10.

You'll also see the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, which indicates how many years of school someone needs to understand your writing. You can also test the readability level of your website by using this free online tool: juicystudio.com/services/readability.php#readweb.

Use these tests as a starting point, but don't count on them to solve your readability issues. Instead, try this simple, five-point readability checklist:

Readability Checklist

- 1 Have you read it out loud? How does it sound? Does it sound like you? Do the sentences flow and make sense, or are there missing words or clumsy phrases?
- 2 Have you printed it out? How does it look? Is there lots of white space surrounding short bits of text that are easy to skim, or are there large, dense blocks of content?
- 3 Have you used simple language that's easy to understand, or are you trying to sound smart with big words, complex sentences, jargon or technical terms?
- 4 Is there structure and coherence to your writing? Do you define, introduce and conclude each topic, or do you expect your reader to connect the dots?
- 5 Have you checked your punctuation, spelling, grammar, spacing, and sentence structure? Are your choices appropriate and consistent with other writing you've published? Hint: Use a style guide and/or a style sheet to make sure.

You're a coach because you want to help people. You've got great ideas that people will benefit from. Don't hesitate to put those great ideas into writing. But while you're at it, make sure people will keep reading them!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Linda Dessau is the author of ***The Customizable Style Guide for Coaches Who Write: Look Smarter, Write Faster, and Get Better Results from Your Writing***. Do you want to improve the readability of everything you write? Grab a copy of this desktop resource. As the only book of its kind, it was created especially for the coaching industry based on her three years of ghostwriting and editing coaching materials.

You'll get specific answers to questions about grammar, punctuation, formatting, and much more. The book also includes detailed guidelines for the kinds of materials coaches write most, including articles, webpages, course lessons, and the like. Visit <http://forcoacheswhowrite.com> to learn more about the book. And if you got this paper from a friend, submit your name and email address at that website now to receive special updates and offers about the book.

Linda Dessau, MTA, CPCC, is a certified coach and the founder of You Talk, I'll Write (www.youtalk-iwrite.com). Her clients are coaches who have great ideas but they're too busy to write, they're intimidated by the writing process or they're worried about making mistakes. Her ghostwriting and editing services are a welcome relief as she helps them finish, polish and get better results from their writing.

“Wow, Linda!! I’d like to personally thank you for trying to make the world a little bit easier for the ‘reading public.’ You have paid amazing attention to detail in your style guide for coaches. It’s exactly these details that can make all the difference to a coach’s credibility. Coaches, are you sure you’re getting it right? Make an investment in a reference tool you’ll use again and again so you can be positive that you will communicate the messages you intend to.”

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