There shouldn't be an aura of mystery attached to writing.
If you know your audience and have something worth communicating, you're more than half way to the finish line!

Writing for the Non-Researcher

Sharing Your Findings With a Larger Audience

Today — more than ever— people are looking for information that will make their lives better.

But the average person — regardless of education — doesn't know about the treasure chest of research information in scientific reports.

In fact, statistics show that a typical academic journal article is read by less than a thousand people.

Accustomed to newspapers and magazines, the typical reader, if he or she does obtain a scientific document, finds the information hard to understand. That is because the information the reader wants is buried in the publication's lengthy text of unfamiliar words and extensive research method justification.

Popular media is easier to understand because journalists have trained for years to express information clearly. Take advantage of the journalist's bag of trade secrets. The following is a writing checklist to help you communicate so that the average reader will want to read and possibly use your research findings.

These tips, based on dissemination research, will allow you to share your research with a broader audience.

Suggestions

- **Streamline information by eliminating unnecessary detail.** An author who gives every research detail loses readers unable or unwilling to decipher the main points of the research. Extract the essence of the research, especially the context and results. Downplay research methodology, because most people selectively tune out information that isn't readily useful. Keep in mind what interests the audience, not what you think should interest them.

- **Tell the reader the benefits of your research at the beginning.** As advertisers know, the benefit — the "what's in it for me" — is the first interest of any consumer. After answering the "what," follow through with the journalistic basics: "Who, when, where, why, and how."

❑ **Address in advance any concerns that the reader may have if the research information conflicts with current thought.** Confront the resistance and fears that typically accompany change.

❑ **Communicate directly to your audience — not above, nor below.** Readers should be comfortable with your publication and not feel as if they are outsiders. You cannot assume the reader understands nothing. . .or everything. Some researchers may be secretly pleased if their writing is not understood. They assume that only the most intelligent can understand their publication. Readers who buy into that thinking blame themselves for incomprehension. That's faulty logic. If a reader can't understand writing, that is the writer's fault, not the reader's.

❑ **Be specific.** Use concrete language rather than abstract rhetoric. A "sizable" reduction in disability parking space violation takes on new meaning if the reduction is 10%, 40%, or 95%.

❑ **Keep your audience's vocabulary in mind and write similar to how two friends talk in casual conversation.** A scholarly document, for example, uses the technical language of its particular field to reach a strictly-defined audience and abounds with formal, multi-syllabic words. A news article, on the other hand, aims for as wide an audience as possible and avoids technical terms except when needed. Instead of using arcane acronyms and the technical words of your field, substitute common words, such as do (*implement*), bring about (*facilitate*), price (*cost impact considerations*), or use (*utilize*). Don't be a show-off. If it is necessary to use a certain technical word for precision of meaning, do so. Give a concise, working definition for unfamiliar terms as soon as you use them. Also, refrain from using foreign phrases and words built on Latin and Greek prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Shorter, more common words are easier to understand.

❑ **Use the active verb voice.** Scientific journals typically employ the passive verb voice for an impersonal description of processes. (When the subject is acted upon, the verb is in the passive voice, for example, *The report was written by the researcher.)* General audience publications instead use the active verb voice for a strong, direct style. (If the subject performs the action, the verb is in the active voice, for example, *The researcher wrote the report.)* This is because the active voice is less evasive than passive and engages readers quicker.

❑ **Shorter is better: Limit each sentence to one idea.** The skill to efficiently grasp meaning is not related to intelligence or advanced degrees. Even highly educated people find it's easier to decipher complex material presented clearly. Unlike a mystery story, the reason for your communication should be bold and clear in each sentence.

Also, sentences more than 25 words overwhelm short-term memory. Why? It's the sentence complexity, not length that confuses readers.

❑ **Keep paragraphs short.** The shorter-is- better advice applies to each paragraph. In most writing, lengthy paragraphs indicate lack of focus. Measure paragraphs by the number of text lines, not sentences.

❑ **Avoid tedious grammatical constructions.** Beware of conditions (for example, *if, then*), multiple negatives (for example*, not uncooperative*), and long strings of nouns.

❑ **Prune prepositional phrases.** They often just pad the distance from one idea to another.

❑ **Avoid using nouns as verbs.** Examples of this include *to impact* or *to interface.* That same advice applies to turning simple verbs into phrases. *Contact* is more to the point than *make contact with.*

❑ **Avoid redundant word combinations and padded phrases.** Do you need "future" before "plan" or "end" before "result?" You know the answer to that question! And, look how one word can knock the stuffing out of these cluttered phrases: at this point in time (now), has the ability to (can), in light of the fact that (because), in the event that (if), the question as to whether (whether) — you get the idea.

❑ **Weave analogies, examples, and anecdotes into your report.** These brief examples personalize research and present it in a way that people can understand.

❑ **Take advantage of visual aids to emphasize significant details.** Often a pie chart or photograph is the piece of information a reader will take note of and retain.

❑ **When finished, revise!** Once you have put together the parts, you understand the whole article better. Revision helps you see the article highlights and what is missing. The big question at this point is: Have you translated from the academic world to the everyday world? Read sentences aloud to test clarity and help you hear whether the sentence is too awkward, confusing, or long. Imagine your reader as you read.

❑ **Use your word-processing software to let you know how readable your text is.** The "tool" section of most word processing programs contains a grammar check program. Not only does it highlight possible grammatical problems, the program also measures readability.

Using a calculation that factors the size of syllables, words, sentences, and paragraphs, this program produces a readability index. If your end number is more than 13, you are sure to lose reader interest.

However, don't rely too much on these formulas and index numbers. Scoring does not take into account such factors as numerals (which read as shorter words); titles

(each one can add many words to a sentence); or necessary technical words. Sometimes there is no way around words such as *empowerment* or web site addresses — both of which then raise the syllable count).

As Dr. Rudolph Flesch, the inventor of a readability test once said, “Readability doesn’t mean blindly following a formula. It means trying to write so that the average reader will read, understand, and remember.”

Written by Cindy Higgins.
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Research and Training Center on Independent Living. University of Kansas
1000 Sunnyside Avenue Room 4089 Lawrence, KS 66045-7555
785.864.4095 voice; 785.864.0706 TDD. www.rtcil.org