
Readability or Clarity in a Global Context?

By David Trickey

One of my colleagues reviewed a blog I had written and suggested I should look into making it more readable and accessible giving me lots of helpful ideas. This got me thinking. How readable (or, worse, unreadable) was it? I noticed that Microsoft Word has a function which produces Readability Statistics for documents. I pulled up my blog and clicked the button: a readability score of 48 out of 100 (argh!) on the Flesch Reading Ease Test, where the minimum is to have between 60 and 70. It also said that you'd have to be an 11th grade to read my blog. Not a bad thing I thought, having looked up what exactly an 11th grader was on Wikipedia. As a Brit I have no idea of the US grading system apart from hearing them mentioned on U.S. TV shows. However, Messrs. Flesch-Kincaid suggest we should aim at 7-8 grade level. I conclude, slightly depressed, that my writing is semi-incomprehensible.

Intrigued by my apparent incompetence, I decide to explore further. I wrote down verbatim (that's word-for-word to 7th graders) something that I had recently overheard while I was at dinner with participants during a training program in the US last month. It was a conversation between Scott from the Detroit office of the company and Franco his colleague from the head office in Italy. Scott said something like this:

Why do you put up with Mark? I think Andrea was spot on with that aside of hers to you over our bite to eat earlier. Listen up, Franco. To get your point across to Mark and make sure he knows where you are coming from, what about just putting what's at the top of your mind on the table? Go on. Just clear things up and get it all sorted it out with him right away.

Franco nodded quietly but blankly...and Scott changed the subject. After lunch I asked Franco if he had understood what Scott had meant about dealing with Mark. "To be honest, no idea" he said, "but I realize that I can't always ask for clarity when we are socializing. I save that for the real battles about budgets and resourcing."

Today I decided to put Scott's words through the Readability Test. Very interesting. Scott was 98% readable and was accessible even to a 2nd grader. Wow! However, I guess that the equivalent of a second grader in Italy would have had some problems deciphering Scott's advice. Apparently Scott did not include any complex words. But complex for whom?

I decided to compose a text which would be the equivalent of Scott's message, but which would be much more accessible to speakers of English as a second language. In particular, it was designed for those with a Latin basis to their language (French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese). This is the Version B of what Scott said:

Why do you accept the way that Mark behaves? I think that Andrea's informal comment made to you during lunch was extremely accurate. Here is my considered advice which I encourage you to think about seriously. Can I suggest that in order to ensure that your perspective is completely understood by Mark, you should explain your thinking and expectations openly about what's important to you, clarify any misunderstandings you have together and resolve your differences immediately?

Taking care to use exactly the same number of words, and really rather pleased with my ability to empathize with the many thousands of 'Latin' clients we have worked with over the years, I copied the text into the same on-line Readability test.

It was less than half as easy to read - 47.3 compared to 97.9. It had to be read by a 10th grader (not a major obstacle, I thought). And it had 17 complex words, compared to zero!

But why was Franco unable to 'read' Scott? Because readability, like beauty, is in the eye (or in this case, the ear) of the beholder.

Half-jokingly, during my workshops with multicultural groups, I suggest to participants who use English as a foreign language and who have strong Latin roots to their mother tongue that they should never ask their Anglo-Saxons to speak simply. That's linguistic suicide. They should always say: "Do you think you could be a bit more sophisticated in the way you speak because we don't understand you well when you keep things so simple." Simple for Anglo-Saxons means keeping things short (and simple). And that means using one-syllable Saxon based words which have very little connection with Latin ("Do you want me to spell it out to you in words of one syllable?" asks the Anglo. NOOO! Not if I have Latin roots). Words of one syllable for Latins will always require an extra mental leap. And the words (or verbs) that Latin-based speakers hate most are...phrasal verbs. Get on, get off, get on with, get through, put off, put up with, put across, etc. There is NO link with Latin here, so for a Latin-based speaker it becomes an exercise in playing tennis with Rafa Nadal, except that you are reduced to being rabbit and are even expected to fetch the ball out of the net when you fail to return serve...humiliating.

So, to go back to my blog and my need to be more accessible. I have now concluded that there is a strong element of cultural bias in what 'readability' and 'accessibility' actually means in a truly global organization. I also think Microsoft has got it wrong and that the readability tests fail to take into consideration the need to communicate in International English, Offshore English or Globish. We need readability which works for everyone, not just the native speakers, who are already perceived as having an unfair advantage with their first language mastery over our 'international colleagues' who have English as a second, third, fourth or fifth language.

David Trickey describes himself as a Global People Strategist. He believes that no one was born global but the implementation of strategy in multinational organizations (ultimately) depends on people and people can become global. He designs company-wide projects which develop global people 'fit' for global organizations. This means partnering with management to build a blueprint so that the high flying international strategy can be implemented by the lower flying people (on the ground) who make it happen in their day-to-day interactions. He manages a team of over 50 support staff and associates around the world, and has personally delivered projects for over 100 organizations who aspire to be global.

David can be contacted on: d.trickey@tco-international.com

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+1-469-522-3389 / +49-173-8262727

lk@leadershipcrossroads.com

www.leadershipcrossroads.com