Assessing readability

The main point
Edit, proof-read, use a readability assessment tool and then get feedback from your audience.

Edit and proof-read your document
It is important to edit, then proof-read your document before assessing readability.
If you are not a professional writer, ask a professional editor or communications advisor to edit your document. If you edit your own document, try to leave it a few days first.
To proof-read your document, read it out loud or ask a colleague to check it.

Use a readability assessment tool
For most consumer-focused resources, aim for Reading Grade 6 (typically ages 11–12 years).
While it’s important to check readability, don’t get hung up on readability scores. Word and sentence length are just two of more than 100 factors that affect reading ease.

Flesch Reading Ease / Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
This is a basic assessment tool in Microsoft Word. In Word, highlight the text you want to assess, go to Review tab, select Spelling and Grammar, then Options, then tick the option for showing readability statistics. With this ticked, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level will be shown after the spelling and grammar check.

Note, a 2010 study published in the Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh stated that the Flesch–Kincaid formula underestimates reading difficulty and that SMOG (see over the page) is a better measure.
Simple Measure of Gobbledygook (SMOG)\textsuperscript{ii}

SMOG calculates reading grade on two factors: the number of syllables in words and the number of words in sentences. There are online tools\textsuperscript{iii} for calculating SMOG, or calculate your own:

Step 1: Count 10 sentences in a row near the beginning of the text to be assessed, 10 in the middle and 10 at the end for a total of 30 sentences. Select blocks of text that do not have lengthy names, email addresses or complex contact details.

Step 2: Count every word with three or more syllables in each group of sentences.
- Treat long sentences split by semi-colons as two sentences, hyphenated words as single words and abbreviations as though they are unabbreviated.
- Include proper nouns (names and titles).
- Treat numbers written as numerals as if they are in written form.

Step 3: Calculate the square root of the number arrived at in Step 2 then add three. That will be the reading grade a person must have reached to fully understand the text.

Suitability Assessment of Materials (SAM)

For a more thorough assessment of your document, use SAM\textsuperscript{iv}.

SAM assesses the wide range of factors that affect reading and comprehension, under the headings of content, literacy demand, graphics, layout and typography, learning, stimulation and motivation, and cultural appropriateness.

It would be time consuming to use SAM to assess everything you write, but always use SAM for a document that is particularly important or complex, or if you have not used it before or not for a while.

To use SAM, score your document using the detailed SAM score sheet.

Get feedback from your target audience

After you have edited, proof read, assessed the readability of your document and made changes as required, it is important to test your document with the intended readers.

Your target group can help identify assumptions of prior knowledge you may have made and any text that is not clear. It is also useful to ask consumers what they think is the main message you are trying to get across.


\textsuperscript{iii} WordsCount, WordsCount, 2009, viewed 21 July 2014, \url{www.wordscount.info/index.html}

\textsuperscript{iv} Doak, Doak & Root, \textit{Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills}, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston MA, 1996, viewed 21 July 2014, \url{www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/resources/teaching-patients-with-low-literacy-skills/}