

*The Digital Course
Creator's Guide to*

WRITING READABLE COURSES



Writing an effective course is deceptively difficult. You might think that all you need is an understanding of the subject and an outline of the important topics. But that's not really enough. When it comes to courses, how you say something is as important as what you're saying.



The more complex your topic, the more readable your language needs to be.

If your writing is convoluted, if the style is academic and stilted, or if the text is simply boring, your learners are unlikely to retain what they've read. That means readability should be one of your top priorities. We're not just talking about documents. Similar guidelines apply if you're writing scripts for video or audio recordings. Ultimately, you need to choose words your learner can understand so they can focus on the material, not the writing.



WHAT IS READABLE LANGUAGE?

Readable language is easily understood. It uses words the reader already knows and defines any new vocabulary. It also presents just one idea at a time, so the learner can understand one concept before moving on to the next. The more complex your topic, the more accessible your language needs to be.

It all comes down to cognitive load. The brain can only process so much information at any time. If you're asking students to decode a complicated sentence full of words they've never heard before, they might not have the cognitive space to remember the information presented.

Here's an example



Anyone who has read a sufficiently complicated sentence such that the schema needed to decode it overwhelmed their cognitive faculties to the degree that the information being presented was obscured, should understand why accessible language is imperative to successful instruction.



The sentence above is grammatically correct. It's also difficult to read and absorb. A more accessible way to say the same thing would be:



Some sentences are so complicated that they get in the way of learning. If you've ever come across one, you understand why accessible language is so important.

The right words, tone, and sentence structure can help the learner rather than creating an extra challenge for them to overcome.



WRITING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL

Readability formulas

Readability formulas use calculations to analyze and score your writing. Often these scores are tied to grade levels or the age of the reader. The Flesch Reading Ease Score, Flesch-Kincaid Formula, and Automated Readability Index are three commonly used readability formulas. They assess word length and the number of words in your sentences to score your writing.

While these numbers can be a useful guideline, they shouldn't be your only measure of readability for two reasons. First, because they're not always consistent. Second, because they don't assess meaning.

Take this example



*"This text has short sentences. It uses short words. That means it will get a good score. It is also boring. It repeats. I can use hard words like **alysm**. You might not know it. But it's short. So my score is still good."*



Among the accessibility checkers that assign a grade-level this example ranks somewhere between Preschool (Automated Readability Index) and Fourth Grade (Coleman-Liau Index). That represents a significant difference in reading ability.

Other checkers score it as easy-to-read (Gunning Fog) or very, very easy-to-read (Flesch Reading Ease Score). Yet it's boring, repetitive, and still contains a vocabulary word learners are unlikely to know.



The point is: don't rely exclusively on readability checkers. Ultimately, your learners are the most reliable judges of what's understandable to them. Before you publish a new course, get feedback from people who match the demographics of your learners. Once the course is in use, you can start asking real students questions about readability.



HOW TO MAKE A MORE READABLE COURSE

If you want your course to be readable, you should steer away from academic language and toward a more engaging, conversational style. This type of writing will look more like a blog post than an academic journal. Here are four ways to make your language more accessible:

1 KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The better you know your learners, the more able you will be to choose language that is accessible to them. Ask yourself these questions when determining your audience:

- What is their level of education prior to this course?
- How well do they know this topic?
- Is the course written in their native language?
- What is their cultural and socioeconomic background?
- How interested are they in the topic?

Answering these questions can help you decide how much background learners need, which words might need to be defined in the text, and what kind of language is appropriate.

2 CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Courses often rely on similes, metaphors, and real-world examples to help readers make connections. Choose these carefully. A sailing metaphor might make sense to you, but it's not helpful for a learner who gets seasick from just looking at a boat.

Even idioms can cause problems since they don't always translate between cultures. You're probably safe with phrases like "see the light" but be careful with regionalisms and symbolic language.

Be aware of your biases when it comes to culture, language, and socioeconomic status. Avoiding biased language could be a guide all on its own, but in general try to avoid assuming a reader's gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, job history, or level of responsibility. If you know your students well, you can certainly tailor your course to match their experience, but avoid assumptions.

3 CONSIDER YOUR TONE

Texts that take a formal, academic tone are often more difficult to read than informal writing. You can make your writing more approachable by:

- **Using contractions:** can't, don't, won't
- **Adding humor.** Just make sure it's appropriate for a professional setting.
- **Writing in second person.** You may have noticed that this guide uses that technique.
- **Occasionally starting a sentence with a conjunction.** And you really can do this.

You don't have to use all of these tactics. But even one or two can make your writing more engaging.

4 SIMPLIFY YOUR SENTENCES

There's a reason that most readability checkers rely on word count and sentence length. Both are good indicators of readability. In general, simple sentences are more readable than complex ones. If a sentence has more than two clauses, you may need to split it up.

Even so, too many simple sentences in a row can get monotonous. Try to mix up your sentence structure so readers don't get bored.

A READABLE COURSE USES:

- ✓ Short, clear sentences
- ✓ An approachable tone
- ✓ Thoughtfully chosen examples
- ✓ Enough background information



BRING IN A PROFESSIONAL

Courses are often written by subject matter experts. On the surface, that makes sense. They understand the subject and have unique insight to share. There's just one problem, they might be experts in their field of study, but that doesn't mean they're experts at writing clearly.

Take for example, a molecular biologist. She certainly has the knowledge to write an intro to biology course. But her writing experience is mostly in writing for academic journals and scientific conferences. As anyone who has ever picked up a scientific journal will tell you, that style of communication isn't always accessible to the layman.



But what about a course in a less academic subject? You might think that your lawyer or HR manager could easily write a course on ADA Compliance for your employees. But there you run into a similar problem. When you hold expert-level knowledge of a subject, it can be difficult to remember that your readers don't share the same background. They're starting from a different knowledge base.

Bringing in a professional writer can help make sure your course communicates effectively. After all, the biologist is an expert in biology, the lawyer is an expert in law, but the writer is an expert in writing.



FIND A CONTENT CREATOR

Good writing is invisible. It doesn't draw attention to itself. Instead, it helps the reader to understand the material. It allows listeners to hear the concepts being described rather than focusing on the words used to explain them. A professional content creator can help you find the right words to make your course readable.



Look for someone who:

- Understands learning science
- Has writing samples that prove their ability
- Communicates clearly and asks insightful questions
- Works to understand your learners and their needs
- Is an expert in grammar, style and tone

Making your courses more readable also makes them more effective. Whether your writing texts, scripts, or question sets, the words you choose can make a big difference.



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