Assessing Written Materials

Measuring readability is one way to assess the literacy level of written materials. When developing materials, it is important to focus on writing in plain language.

Readability Formulas

Two common readability formulas are the SMOG Readability Formula and the Fry Graph Reading Level Index. The Fry Graph method is based on the number of sentences in three 100-word passages and is best for longer publications. The SMOG formula measures the number of syllables in a 30-sentence passage within a publication and is better for shorter publications.

Many websites are available to calculate readability. Word processing programs will also calculate the reading level of text. The Flesch-Kincaid score given by Microsoft Word is often lower than the Fry or SMOG. Use the electronic version and compute it manually to see how they compare.

Documents need to be prepared before using one of the readability programs. Remove text that is not in full sentences, such as titles, headings, and bulleted points. Programs look for punctuation to determine the number of sentences. A document may contain periods that do NOT indicate the end of a sentence. Readability programs can not differentiate those. For example, if there are abbreviations such as M.D. or R.D., programs may "see" those single letters as short sentences. This could bring the average sentence length down and the score will be artificially low.

Measuring Understanding

Readability is just one measurement and alone does not imply a document is understandable. Depending on words used, text can be incomprehensible at any grade level. The Suitability of Assessment Materials (SAM) tool provides a way to assess materials in multiple formats.

The CDC Clear Communication Index (Index) is a research-based tool to help develop and assess public communication materials. The Index has 4 introductory questions and 20 scored items drawn from scientific literature in communication and related disciplines. The items represent the most important characteristics that enhance and aid people's understanding of information.