

The science of comprehension

How to assess your communications

By

Francis Wyburd

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Introduction

I worked in Marketing & Communication roles for over ten years and never once did someone point me to the science that would help us engage better with our audiences.

My first marketing job was as a press officer where I had to write my own text but soon after I was using copywriters. They tended to fall into the “trust me, I’m an expert category” or the “don’t dare question me category”. Neither could be evaluated objectively.

But it wasn’t for another ten years that I discovered a wealth of social science that could aid the crafting of communications. And amongst them I came across SMOG and other readability indices.

This paper briefly explores the science of readability and the tools available for practitioners to use that will aid them to engage audiences better.

Background

Over forty years ago, Harry McLaughlin, gave up working as a journalist at the Daily Mirror and decided instead to pursue an academic and teaching career in what he describes as applied psychology.

Early on he pursued a doctorate in psycholinguistics and specialised in understanding readability, conducting his dissertation on ‘What makes prose readable’. He became a Communications Lecturer at City University and by 1969, whilst now at the University of Syracuse, Canada, he established that the differing degrees of comprehension by any reader depended on their educational experience and the numbers of syllables used in the text. His work culminated in the development of the delightfully named “SMOG counter” (or

“Simplified measure of gobbledegook”), an algorithm for assessing the readability of any text.

By analysing the number of words per sentence with more than three syllables he could calculate an educational score, highlighting the number of years of education the reader would require to comprehend the text. The scoring system he developed ranged from 0 years to 19+ (Postgraduate). So for instance, a text scoring 19 would be comprehensible by a post-doctorate type audience whilst a score of 12 would be comprehensible to anyone who got to Year 12 at school. Put another way, the lower the score the less exclusive and the more comprehensible a piece of text would be to more people.

Applications for practitioners

For organisations today, the SMOG counter provides a simple yet powerful tool to help them understand how well they communicate.

Whether on a website, in a presentation, document or sales materials, the SMOG counter helps you assess the accessibility of your language. And as being understood is the pre-requisite for developing a productive relationship, it should be used as widely as possible.

Yet what is so disappointing is how few organisations think about the language they use, judging by the gobbledygook ones has to wade through these days. What is also odd is that Harry’s algorithm has been publicly available for decades and yet few people seem to know or about it let alone use it.

Personally, it’s the waste of my time I object to. Having to wade through oblique writing hinders the ability to understand the relevance of any communication and therefore whether it requires attention.

So it's perhaps not surprising that those enterprises that do give this their attention are pretty good at engaging with people. The corollary of course is that many who do not pay attention, struggle to engage very effectively with anyone.

The truth is, most organisations get by with poor communications unaware how they make their audience struggle to understand what the hell they are talking about. And in today's economy, making your customers work hard and struggle to understand you is not a healthy way to behave.

WYS Analysis

In 2009, we analysed ten websites of organisations in the UK. They were selected to enable us to compare and contrast different organisations whose audiences had vastly different educations.

To do this, we copied sample text and pasted it into the counter here:

http://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp.

We chose the SMOG index but there are several other tools available, including the Coleman Liau index, Flesch Kincaid Grade Level, ARI (Automated Readability Index). The measure of readability used (score) is the indication of number of years of education that a person needs to be able to understand the text easily on the first reading.

The results (Table 1) throw up interesting insights into the score variations across organisations. They are ranked in order of ease of use with the first ones scoring the lowest (easiest to read) and the latter ones the highest (hardest to read).

Table 1: SMOG scores ranked in order of simplicity

UK websites analysed	Text Selection	SMOG score
Daily Mirror	Lead story 12 May 2009	11.15
Innocent Drinks	Our story	11.62
McKinsey & Company	What we do	11.98
Daily Star	Full Story: Miss GB Crisis	14.2
No. 10 Downing Street website	Meet the PM – letter from Gordon Brown	14.94:
Health Protection Agency	Swine Flue: Advice on exclusion from schools and workplaces	15.02
Public Relations Consultants Association	Press Release: Communications Professionals losing public trust	16.17
Google	Company Information	16.81
Department for children, schools and families	Early years literacy support programme	19.17
The (English) Football Association	Who we are	19.81

This is by no means an exhaustive study nor does it seek to criticise. But it is useful to contrast different styles across types of organisations.

Summary

Of course, readability is only one aspect of communications. Using distinct and salient language is also critical if you want anyone to pay attention but being clear comes first.

Anyone wishing to pay greater attention to how people can engage with them, should start with access. Harry's SMOG counter and the other similarly available tools, provide a useful way to improve human engagement.

NB: This article has a SMOG rating of: 18

Appendix

Methodology

In May 2009 we cut and pasted sections of copy, of over 30 sentences each from 10 websites. We entered them into the SMOG tool (now disabled) at www.wordscount.info.

This produced the score we used to populate the table.

About the author

Francis Wyburd is a management advisor to public and private sector organisations about how to engage people better. Formerly a marketing agency boss, he now runs his own London-based advisory business, WYS. In his free time, he conducts research into human behaviour and the unconscious mind to help him understand how and why people behave in the way they do. He is married and lives with six women, four cats, a dog and a snake in London.