

# How to Improve the Clarity of Your Writing

*By Michael Masterson*

## How to Consistently Score 8.5 or Below on the Flesch-Kincaid Grading Scale

In most areas of life, getting high grades means you are doing well. When it comes to writing, however, the most popular grading system works inversely.

The Flesch-Kincaid (FK) scale is a statistical program designed to measure simplicity of expression. Simplicity of expression, some publishers believe, is an important quality of good writing.

I am a big proponent of simplicity of expression. And I've been recommending the FK to fellow writers and publishing clients for many years as a useful tool to achieve simplicity. *Early to Rise* requires its written submissions to be graded on the FK scale. And Stansberry & Associates uses it for *all* its promotional copy.

The FK program calculates the average number of words per sentence, the average number of syllables per sentence, and the frequency of passive and complex constructions.

Most magazine and newspaper writing falls between grade levels 8.0 and 12.0. Academic and scientific text is generally in the 10.0 to 14.0 range. Dialog tends to be graded at the 4.0 to 6.0 levels. The text you have been reading in this article so far, for example, has an FK score of 10.2.

A grade level close to 11 is considered moderately difficult to understand. Some writers feel "moderately difficult" is perfectly okay. But I don't want my writing to be moderately difficult. I want it to be easy to understand. An FK score of 7.0 to 8.5 is my goal.

But does that make any sense? Is it reasonable to want to achieve a low FK grade for every essay I write? Shouldn't some essays – those that express more complex thoughts – have higher FK grades?

Can you really bring down the FK score without also bringing down the quality of the copy?

The short answer is yes.

Yes, you can get your FK scores into the 7.0 to 8.5 range even if your copy is full of big, beautiful ideas. Not only will your ideas be preserved, they might even be improved by the simplicity.

Let me prove it to you. Let me rewrite this article using a few of the tricks I've learned about good writing. Let's see if I can get it down to 8.5 or below. Are you ready? Here goes:

## Take Two!

# How to Consistently Score 8.5 or Below on the Flesch-Kincaid Grading Scale

Steve Sjoggerud's investment newsletter, *True Wealth*, has 70,000 subscribers – one of the highest circulations in the industry. It also has one of the highest renewal rates at more than 75%. Steve's e-zine gets super-high open rates. And when he publishes a new report, his readers buy it in droves. By every standard of measurement, Steve is a very successful writer.

What's his secret? At a writing seminar in France last summer, he explained it:

"When I started writing, Michael told me I had to learn to write more simply. He told me that successful writers have two skills: coming up with good ideas and expressing them clearly. I agreed with him about good ideas.

"But I wasn't sure that writing simply is that important. So I conducted a secret study. I scanned all of Agora's writers and rated them on the grading scale Michael recommended. What I discovered surprised me. There was a direct relationship between simplicity and success. The writers who had the lowest Flesch-Kincaid scores had the highest renewal rates.

"In fact, the three most successful writers all had the lowest FK grades. I decided Michael was right. I started using the program to simplify my writing. It was difficult. But gradually it became easy, almost automatic. I am convinced that the reason *True Wealth* has 70,000 readers today is because it is so easy to read."

Steve is not the only successful writer who believes in simplicity. Michael Palmer, who heads up Agora's most successful copywriting team, insists that all his writers keep their FK scores below 8.0. That's been the standard for *The Golden Thread* and *Early to Rise* recently, and it's becoming a standard throughout Agora.

Simplicity of expression is not the most important quality of good writing. Content ranks first. If you want to be a good writer, the most important thing to do is present your reader with good thinking. If your thoughts have quality, your writing will too.

But if you express your good thoughts in a complex or clumsy way, you make it difficult for your readers to grasp them. Good ideas have the greatest impact when they are expressed simply and directly. A good thought, like a beautiful woman, should not be cloaked in a bundle of rags.

The best tool I've found to measure simplicity is the Flesch-Kincaid grading scale. Flesch-Kincaid calculates the average number of words per sentence, the average number of syllables per sentence, and the frequency of passive and complex constructions.

Most magazine and newspaper writing falls between grade levels 8.0 and 12.0. Academic and scientific text is generally in the 10.0 to 14.0 range. Dialog tends to be graded at the 4 to 6 levels. The text you have been reading so far in this rewritten article, for example, achieves a grade of 7.8.

Does that surprise you?

In less than 10 minutes, I was able to reduce my score from 10.2 to 7.8. You've just read what I did. None of the details were sacrificed. Nor was the main idea. In fact, my second effort is stronger. Don't you think?

I've had lots of conversations with writers about the FK program. Many of them went as follows:

Self-Important Writer: Why should I get my writing below 8.5? That's not even high school level.

Me: The grade level has nothing to do with academic reading levels. That's a popular myth.

Self-Important Writer: Still, I don't want to dumb-down my writing. I don't want to write for people who are too dumb to understand me.

Me: It's not a question of dumb. It's a question of efficiency. If you write simply, then all your readers, smart and dumb, can grasp your ideas more easily.

Self-Important Writer: Let them work to understand me. My thoughts are worth it.

Me (thinking): Maybe. Or maybe your thoughts are not so good. And you want to disguise them with complicated and confusing writing.

I do believe that. When the thinking is weak, the writer senses it. Rather than expose its weakness to the light of clarity, he obfuscates it with clumsy expressions.

By the way, the Flesch-Kincaid grade level of this rewritten article is now 6.6.

Is that amazing? Would you like to know how I did it?

# My Top Techniques for Scoring 8.5 or Below

1.

The most effective way to keep your writing good and simple is to write about one – and only one – big idea at a time. Figure out exactly what you want to say. Stick to that and eliminate other, unrelated ideas, even if you think they are interesting.

2.

Whenever appropriate, introduce that idea with a story. Stories have two advantages. First, they are concrete, not abstract. That means they are usually told with simple, active sentences. Such sentences get low scores on the FK scale. They are quickly read and easily comprehended.

The second advantage is that stories involve readers emotionally. They make the reader *care* about the idea. In my first effort at writing this piece, I started academically, with an abstraction. Read it again and you will see how abstract it seems. Unless you already had a special knowledge of or interest in Flesch-Kincaid, you probably wouldn't want to read past the first paragraph. In rewriting it, I began by introducing Steve Sjuggerud as a successful writer and telling his story. That made a big difference in the sentences I used. It brought the score down from 10.2 to 7.8.

3.

By sticking to one idea, it is much easier to avoid complex sentences. Complex sentences are those that are linked by coordinating conjunctions, such as since, whereas, inasmuch as, notwithstanding, therefore, etc. Complex sentences are not always bad, but they are often unnecessary. When your thinking is unclear, they are more likely to appear.

4.

By starting with a story, I got my writing in the active voice. Active sentences ("John kicked the ball.") score lower than passive sentences ("The ball was kicked by John.") They are easier to understand. And they carry more emotional power.

5.

To get my score even lower, I used my secret Kincaid crusher – a technique I only recently discovered but will happily share with you. I dealt with possible objections to my thesis through dialog. Dialog, I've found, generally has a very low FK grade. If it is natural – i.e., the kind of speech that ordinary people engage in – it will grade at 4.0 to 6.0. Using dialog is not just a trick to fool the system. Like storytelling, it makes an idea come to life in an emotionally compelling way.

There are certainly other secrets to be discovered. But if you employ any or all of these five, you will see a quick and dramatic reduction in your FK grade. Getting your grade down means bringing the clarity of your writing up. Despite what the self-important writers say, that's a good thing.

My final FK score for this entire rewritten article: 6.7

[Ed. Note: To "turn on" the FK program in Word, click Tools on the toolbar, then click Options, then click Spelling & Grammar, then select Check Grammar with Spelling, then select Show Readability Statistics, then click OK. Once you've done that, the FK score will be displayed on your screen after you spell-check your document.]

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## 9 Responses to "How to Improve the Clarity of Your Writing"

Wow, I just tested the FK scale on my previous writing. I took a sales letter written for a business, and got an FK of 8.3. I took a children's book I have just completed and the FK grade was 3.0, yet the writing in both copies was simple and easy to understand. Perhaps writing sales letters in the same way as writing for children would give a good start to the simplicity needed for good copy. I am blown away by this and will be using it in everything I write.

*Guest (James Nailen-Smith) – over a year ago*

I write guidance documents for a living. Readability is critical. FK is the most important tool that I have. You don't have to sacrifice clarity of thought when reducing complexity. In fact there is an inverse relationship between clarity and complexity of writing.

*Guest (Dagar) – over a year ago*

A woman was driving on a curvy mountain road with the convertible top down. A man passed her hanging out his car window. He yelled "pig" at her. She thought, "HOW RUDE!" She then came around the next curve and hit a pig in the road. I guess it's about understanding.

*Guest (VG) – over a year ago*

I tried to turn on the FK program on my Word, but no luck. There's no "Option" under the "Tools" in my toolbar. I have Office MAC Home and Student 2011. Any clues how to turn it on in Word 2011 for Mac? Thanks for your help.

*Guest (Cynthia)* – over a year ago

Hi Cynthia, on a Mac instead of going to Tools > Options, you go to Word > Preferences. Once you get there the instructions are the same:

Click Spelling & Grammar, then select Check Grammar with Spelling, then select Show Readability Statistics, then click OK. Run the spell check on your document when you want to see the FK score.

*Josh* – over a year ago

in Word, click Tools on the toolbar, then click Options, then click Spelling & Grammar, then select Check Grammar with Spelling, then select Show Readability Statistics, then click OK.

From Options my LT goes to another window and fails to bring up the rest of it. I Have Windows 7

*Guest (Ron)* – over a year ago

Hi. I have a MAC. Is there another program for checking your an FK grade?

Thanks, Connie

*Guest (Connie)* – over a year ago

Here is a site that you can check to see readability. [read-able.com](http://read-able.com)

You can also install the bookmarklet into your browser.

*John72* – over a year ago

How does one lower the FK score for sentences using statistics? I.e., 2,751 adults were surveyed. FK score: 15.4.

*Guest (Renee)* – over a year ago

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**American Writers & Artists Institute**

220 George Bush Blvd, Suite D

Delray Beach, FL 33444

(561) 278-5557 or (866) 879-2924