Developing

Grade-specific

Literacy

Material

Allegheny County Health Department
Bureau of Policy Development & Assessment

March 18, 1998

Table of Contents

Introduction

This is a report on the development of low literacy reading material. It combines information from different internet sources with the most significant contribution from Oregon State University Extension Home Economics at http://osu.orst.edu/dept/ehe/index2.html.

There are a multitude of sites on the internet dedicated to language translation and to illiteracy, but none of the sites have tools that automatically translate regular text into low literacy level text. While the development of such a program may be possible, the absence of such a tool may be due to programmatic complexity. Lack of a profitable market for such a tool may also be a reason.

The next five chapters cover major elements in the manual creation of low literacy level material. Any one of them could be used as a development guide. They employ common sense ideas such as the use of simple words and short sentences, ideas which may often just be overlooked.

The next chapter covers the more sensitive task of eliminating ethnic and cultural bias from printed material.

After that, two items are described- Rightwriter and the Flesch Reading Ease Scale(FRES). While Rightwriter seems like a commendable product, it also appears to be an old product. The last revision found was dated 1993 which is ancient in computer program terms. In addition some of the reviews which not positive. On the other hand FRES is quite current. In fact the newer versions of Wordperfect(7.0 and later) have it included under the TOOLS-GRAMMATIK menus. Examples of FRES dialog screens in Wordperfect are at the end of this report.

Improve Your Writing with 'Instant Writing Course'

- ✓ Use short sentences
- ✓ Use short paragraphs
- ✓ Use easy words
- ✓ Use active verbs
- ✓ Use personal words
- ✓ Get to the point FAST!:

Rationale for all of the above- shorter the writing, the more likely it will be read and remembered.

Short sentences*.* No more than 15-20 words if you can help it. The best way to shorten sentences is with periods. Lots of them. Close together.

Short paragraphs. Long paragraphs give an overall appearance of a mass of gray when in print. So lighten up. For openers, you might try just one sentence per paragraph. Seldom use more than three sentences in a paragraph.

Easy words*.* Use the simple word instead of the complicated one. Avoid techinical terms. Avoid jargon.

Active verbs*.* They keep moving. For examples, of active verbs, check sport pages (beat, whipped) or recipes (beat, whipped). Of course there are lots of other action verbs that just plain move readers better than "be" verbs such as "is", "was", and "are."

Personal words*.* The more personal the writing, the higher the human interest. Use quotes, names, and personal pronouns when you can. Instead of, "One should not throw stones in glass houses." say, "You should not throw..." or "Don't throw..." where the subject is the understood *you*. Or "Joe should not..." where the subject is a name.

Get to the point FAST! Most people are in a hurry and have a short attention span. When they read a newspaper, they may only glance at headlines and first paragraphs. If you don't get their attention fast or if you don't get the most important points high in the story, readers will miss them. Anyway, editors usually edit by cutting from the bottom. If your good stuff is at the bottom, it may get chopped off.

—Joe Marks, professor and information specialist, University of Missouri, and visiting science writer at OSU

Does Your Lesson Contain All It Could?

Here are some suggestions to consider when developing quality and effective interactive educational materials.

THE LESSON

- ✓ Title ("catchy," addresses benefits to the learner, is tied to learner needs, suggests action, is short)

- ✓ Purpose (one sentence that describes the intended learner outcome - this is useful for quick identification)

- ✓ Introductory paragraph (reminds the teacher to review what was covered in previous class, what did learners do differently?)

- ✓ Key concepts ("big ideas" that we want learners to have i.e. Tasty low fat food choices can be substituted for high fat food choices at fast food restaurants).

- ✓ Learning objectives (measurable behaviors that we can observe learners doing, i.e. Identify at least one low fat fast food.)

- ✓ Instructional methods (list audience(s), materials needed, estimated time needed, is this group or individual activity) Consider using an "attention-grabber" or icebreaker at the beginning.

- ✓ Background information (What does the teacher need to know to teach this lesson/activity?)

- ✓ Conclusion and goal setting (What did learner learn? And what will each do or apply in the next week or two?) Consider incentives or reminders like magnets, calendars, wallet cards, hang tags, other.)

HANDOUTS

- ✓ Keep it simple (The Rule of 3: 3 major points with 3 supporting points for each OR a maximum of 5 - 7 points)

- ✓ Make it interactive (Is there a place for the learner to write on the handout or circle foods they will eat?)

- ✓ Tailor to different cultural groups (Messages may vary by cultural group)

- ✓ Use quotes from "real people" (This personalizes the information and helps learners to see that others find the information useful).

Just Say It!

In this module you will learn about getting your message across simply by using simple, clear words in place of more complex, unclear words.

How well do you communicate with your learners? And how well do your learners understand what you teach them?

Let's consider 2 of the 4 C's of good communication:

✓ **Clear** - Say things simply enough so that they cannot be misunderstood.

✓ **Concise** - Get to the point.

(The other 2 C's are **complete** - give the complete message and **correct** - make sure what you say is true). Source: National Food Service Mgmt. Institute, 1997.

To be clear and concise, it helps to simplify your writing. Although simplifying written materials is not only a matter of using shorter words and sentences, it does help when you "choose to lose" those big words.

Shorter words - those that have fewer syllables - can help you be clear and concise. When you are clear and concise you are not "dumbing down" your writing. Readers appreciate information that is easy to find and understand. Remember the words of Texas Bix Bender:

"You don't need decorated words to make your meanin' clear. Say it plain and save some breath for breathin.'"

So, to get you started on the "path to simplicity," here are some sentences. Can you choose some *word substitutions* for the words in bold to simplify them?

1. Fruits ***contain*** fiber.

2. A ***deficiency*** of calcium can increase your ***possibility*** of getting weak bones (osteoporosis) later in life.

3. ***Purchase*** whole-grain foods to help meet your daily fiber ***requirements***.

Answers:

1.   Fruits *have* fiber.

2.   A *lack of* calcium can increase your *chance* of getting weak bones (osteoporosis) later in life.

3.   *Buy* whole-grain foods to help meet your daily fiber *needs*.

One way to find out if your writing is too complex is to have someone else read it. Choose someone who 1) may reflect your audience or the general public (i.e., a secretary) and 2) who may not be very familiar with your subject matter. Of course, pretesting your material also helps.

If you **must** use unfamiliar words, put the technical term in parentheses after the more common word or phrase that defines it:

"...weak bones (osteoporosis)..."

If you have any questions about word substitutions and choosing simpler words when developing written materials, contact schustee@ccmail.orst.edu

What You Can Begin to Do to Simplify The Words You Use:

1.   Next time you sit down and write a memo to colleagues, make it a point to choose simple and direct words in your memo.

2.   When revising a publication, use simple words to clarify your writing - a dictionary or thesaurus can help you find simpler words.

3.   Next time you sit down to write an article for the newspaper, take an article that you had previously written and simplify it.

Ten Keys to Success: What Works with Hard-to-Reach Audiences

(Adapted from remarks by Karen L. Konzelmann, currently National Program Leader, Maternal and Child Health, CSREES/USDA to Indiana Dietetic Association, November 1992)

1) Present practical information.
People are busy, people are tired. They do not want to sit through and deal with things that are important to you but not to them. Make your comments personal and relevant to the audience — then your remarks will matter.

2) Focus on the positive.
Avoid the word "avoid." It is much better to say, for example, "For good health, most of us need to eat more fruits and vegetables" rather than "You can't have..." or "Don't eat..." Negatives are turn-offs.

3) Keep it possible.
Listen first before offering advice and solutions that are not possible. Be realistic. There is not much point in explaining to someone how to bake a meal in the oven when he or she may be using nothing more than an electric skillet because there is no working oven available.

4) Use the "Kiss" principle.
"Keep it simple, sweetie." Teach one or two concepts, not ten all at one time. People aren't stupid, but they may be unfamiliar with the material you are presenting. It is important to build their trust and rapport and help them increase their comfort level.

5) Make it visual.
The more examples and actual products you can show, the better people follow the information. For Foods and Nutrition topics, use comparison cards, Dairy Council food models, actual cans, jars and boxes.

Set the stage, if it is possible by hanging posters, charts, and other visual aids in the room.

Grocery bags with two types of choices are wonderful teaching tools and are kind of fun because everyone wants to know what you have in the bags.

6) Be interactive...get learners involved.
Get people involved in preparing a snack, or a special recipe. A group we worked with in Ft. Wayne prepared their lunch together. At first it was hard. They literally did not know how to boil water...lunch took a long time to prepare. After one month, they rated the group lunch preparation as one of the best tools for learning.

7) Use modern, up-to-date materials.
This is the 90's...the age of information, where television and advertising portray slick, jazzy messages. We have to compete. Poor people do not deserve poor quality materials.

8) Watch the reading level.
Major convenience food producers are re-writing their directions more simply and frequently, with pictoral instruction. Handouts should be limited in number, contain practical information, and be easy to understand. Keep sentences simple, but not so simple as to be demeaning.

9) Know enough about what motivates clientele to use it to advantage.
Many women will not do much for themselves, but will make an effort to choose more nutritious food for the sake of their children. Once you know this, you know how to word information.

10) Be accepting and non-judgmental.
Acceptance is simply seeing something the way it is and saying, "That's the way it is." It is not approval or consent or sympathy or agreement, just acceptance. It is not our business to judge or criticize. Nobody likes a "do-gooder" or a "know-it-all." At-risk audiences have dealt with so many of these sorts or people they often can automatically tune out all that person says. Don't try to con them; they have seen it all and the word FAKE screams out.

In all programs, it is extremely important that the participant's world be validated and considered. Invalidating (i.e. ignoring) the participant's life experiences is dehumanizing and creates shame, guilt and confusion. Ultimately, the challenge is to truly meet each person where he or she is, accepting that individual in the context of his or her own life, and offering whatever information and support the client desires and is willing to accept. In other words, the challenge is to understand first and teach second.

Where do you start?

Once you are aware of the need for more readable educational materials, it's easy to feel uncertain about your writing. You begin to look critically at everything you read. Whether or not you need to develop lower literacy materials as part of your work, consider using some of the following techniques in your everyday writing for greater clarity.

Organization

✓ Use heading and subheading (these tell the reader what is coming next and break up long columns).

✓ Present only the most important information.

Language and style

✓ Use short sentences: not more than 25 words.

✓ Use short paragraphs: not more than 60 words.

✓ Write in the active voice, not passive voice: "Read the instructions before beginning" is easier to understand than "Instructions should be read before beginning."

✓ Use concrete examples to illustrate a point: "You get Vitamin A in dark green leafy vegetables and deep orange vegetables. Spinach, carrots, orange vegetables, or squash are vegetables that have Vitamin A."

✓ Repeat new or unfamiliar information to reinforce learning.

✓ Avoid clichés and jargon: "Labels let you in on the inside" may be too abstract. "Container labels can tell you a lot about what's inside the package" is better.

✓ If you must use a technical, unfamiliar word, explain the word with a simple definition or example.

✓ Repeat new or unfamiliar words several times to make them more familiar to the reader.

✓ Use positive statements: "Follow safe practices" is better than "Do not follow unsafe practices."

Design

✓ Use an unjustified right margin.

✓ Use larger, easy-to-read type for text (10-12 point).

✓ Use upper and lower case letters, which are easier to read than all capitals.

A Guide to Bias-Free Communications

A Reference for Preparing Official Publications

People in the academic/professional community are increasingly aware of the need to use language that recognizes diversity and does not offend, demean, or exclude people on the basis of gender, race, ethnic group, religion, age, ability/disability or sexual orientation.

Changing our language usage, however, does not come easily or automatically. Familiar ways of writing and speaking are more comfortable; substitute phrases do not always spring quickly to mind.

This guide is meant to help you find a more encompassing word or phrase when you need it and to be more attuned to language that, whether intended or not, may offend others. The guide aims primarily at written material but applies as well to the spoken word.

This area is controversial and in flux. Usage that groups prefer today may change next year, and this guide will need to be updated. The point is to try to communicate in a way that is respectful of diversity. Also, the examples cited may not satisfy everyone.

We welcome your comments, questions, and suggestions on how to make this guide more useful and pertinent.

Note: The below is an excerpt from a publication from the University of Wisconsin, Office of University Publications, 608/262-0948.

Race and Ethnicity

1. Avoid identifying people by race or ethnic group unless it is relevant. We don't usually point out that an individual is white or of Anglo-Saxon heritage. The same rule should apply to other groups.

Inappropriate	Recommended
Andrew Young, the black mayor of Atlanta, cast his vote.	Andrew Young, the mayor or Atlanta, cast his vote.
Maria Duran, a Hispanic professor of physics, has been promoted to associate professor.	Maria Duran, a professor of physics, has been promoted to associate professor.
Alpha Beta Gamma, the black fraternity, wants to re-roof its building	The Alpha Beta Gamma fraternity wants to re-roof its building.

2. Avoid the term "non-white", which sets up white culture as the standard by which all other cultures should be judged. Also avoid "culturally disadvantaged" and "culturally deprived." These terms imply that the dominant culture is superior to other cultures or that other groups lack a culture.

3. Refer to individuals as "member of a minority group" or specify the minority group (e.g., Latino) when minority group identity is pertinent. ("Minority" refers to a group and serves as a modifier in the term "minority group.")

Example	**Recommended**
Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.	Women and members of minority groups are encouraged to apply.
Minorities attended the meeting.	Members of the Hmong and Koren communities attended the meeting.

4. Avoid words, images, or situations that reinforce stereotypes and that imply all people of a particular race or ethnic group are the same.

Example
Not surprisingly, the Asian-American students did best in the math contest.
The Problem
Assuming it is relevant to point out that this group excelled, the phrase "not surprisingly" may reinforce the stereotype that all Asian Americans have superior aptitude in math.

5. Be sure your communications do not patronize or give token mention to members of racial or ethnic groups. Exaggerated focus on people's accomplishments or insincere and gratuitous references to their concerns imply that they are not normally successful or accomplished, or are not considered to be in the mainstream of society.

6. Stay attuned to the current terminology by which racial and ethnic groups refer to themselves. Usage changes (e.g., from "Negro" to "African American"; from "Oriental" to "Asian American"). National newspapers and television news are good indicators of current usage. Also, ask people what term they prefer.

People who trace their ancestry through the Caribbean or Central and South America may identify themselves as coming from any one of a number of different cultures and ethnic groups. For instance, the terms Hispanic, Latino/a, Chicano/a, and Puertorriqueno/a all have different meanings. Many people whom the U.S. Census would describe as "Hispanic" prefer the term "Latino or Latina." Some people with Spanish-sounding surnames may have indigenous Indian, German, or Asian ancestry or prefer to be referred to by the nationality; e.g., Colombian, Nicaraguan, Guatemalan. Others may prefer that no reference be made to their nationality or ancestry.

People whose ancestors originally populated North America may want to be identified with specific communities, such as Winnebago or Chippewa, or they may prefer to be referred to as "American Indian" or "Native American" rather than "Indian." If in doubt, ask.

Also, attention must be paid to the punctuation used in referring to racial and ethnic groups. The terms "African American," "Asian American," etc., are nouns and should not be hyphenated. However, when these terms are used as modifiers (e.g., "the Asian-American students" in the example under number 4), they should be hyphenated.

7. Be sensitive to religion when referring to various ethnic groups. Don't make assumptions. For instance, just as not all Arabs are Muslims, most nationalities and ethnicities will embody different religious practices. Avoid stereotyping a race, nationality or ethnic group with a specific religion.

8. Review written communications and visual materials to ensure that, where appropriate, all groups—women, men, minority and ethnic group members, older people, and disabled people—are represented.

This does not mean that every publication, video, or similar material must include all groups at all times, or that participation of particular groups should be exaggerated or overstated. But generic publications, such as bulletins or communications that are part of a continuing series (such as newspapers or annual reports), should aim for reasonable representation of all groups involved.

Resources that can help you

Books

One of the best books for those interested in developing low literacy materials is *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills*, by Cecilia C. Doak, Leonard G. Doak and Jane H. Root. Published in 1985, this book targets the health field. It covers written materials as well as visuals, oral materials like audiotapes, and pretesting of materials.

For a book that focuses on the social and policy issues around literacy, read *Illiterate America*, by Jonathan Kozol. It provides many examples of the effects of illiteracy.

Reading formulas and computer programs

There are more than 40 formulas that assess the degree of difficulty of written material. Some of the more common ones are *Flesch*. Most look at work difficulty and sentence length. Applying these formulas by hand requires some calculation and time.

There are a few computer programs such as *RightWriter*. It is a recommended computer software program. It can be found for less than $100. Remember that computer programs can assess only the readability of written pieces. Other factors such as page setup, type size, and use of illustrations affect how easy the material is to read and understand.

Written materials

There are a few resources that are available to further help you write for those with limited reading skills.

Guidelines: Writing for Adults with Limited Reading Skills, by N. Gaston and P. Daniels is available from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.

Writing for Reading: A Guide for Developing Print Materials in Nutrition for Low Literacy Adults, by S. Nitzke, A. Shaw, S. Pingree, and S. Voichick is available from the University of Wisconsin-Extension.

RightWriter

Publisher: Rightsoft/Que Software

Computer: Mac IBM Windows

Grades 9-12, Adult

Reviewed

A+ rating

   RightWriter is a grammar and style checker for documents created with most word processors. To use RightWriter, you create your document as you normally would. Then you run RightWriter with one easy command. RightWriter creates a marked-up copy of your original with comments which point out errors in grammar, style, usage, and punctuation. An advanced feature allows words to be added to the program''s audience, jargon, slang, and user-defined dictionaries. Utilizing artificial intelligence and advanced parsing in combination with more than 4,500 rules, this program is well suited for use in English, creative and business writing and other classes.

   Does not check spelling. DeskMate compatible. Requires 2 disk drives or hard drive. IBM requires CGA or better.

2544-Mac	Macintosh 1MB	49.95
2544-PC5+3	IBM 512K 5"	49.95
2544-Win	Windows 1MB	49.95

Reviewer Summary:

Rightwriter for Windows (Version 5.0) is a grammar and style checker that incorporates more than 6,000 rules to flag possible problems in grammar, style, usage, capitalization, and punctuation. It is a flexible program for its kind in that it allows users to decide what writing style to analyze among five, or they can even create one of their own. Choices are also available for how the program will respond—allowing editing during analysis of a draft, producing a summary comment, or creating a marked-up copy with possible errors flagged and appropriate questions asked. Users may specify to what the software will respond and in how much depth.

Reviewer Comments:

This software is appropriate for all levels of students, from high school on up, and would take no longer than an hour or so to learn as with Editor and other grammar and style checkers, I cannot say that this software provides a unique approach, but it is thorough and easy to use, and it gives ample feedback on a variety of issues in writing that could take some of the burden off the instructor. I like the program's flexibility and ease of use. It is a good tool to help a writer think about his or her writing, and I believe it would get students to look more carefully at their own work. This program needs a spellchecker.

A Note on the Flesch Factor

"What's the Flesch Factor?"

[SAMPLE]

Please note the continuing TFY reader service and tribute to linguist Rudolf Flesch: For each article, "Flesch Factor" boxes display **readability calculations**:

"70 = EASY!"
FLESCH FACTOR

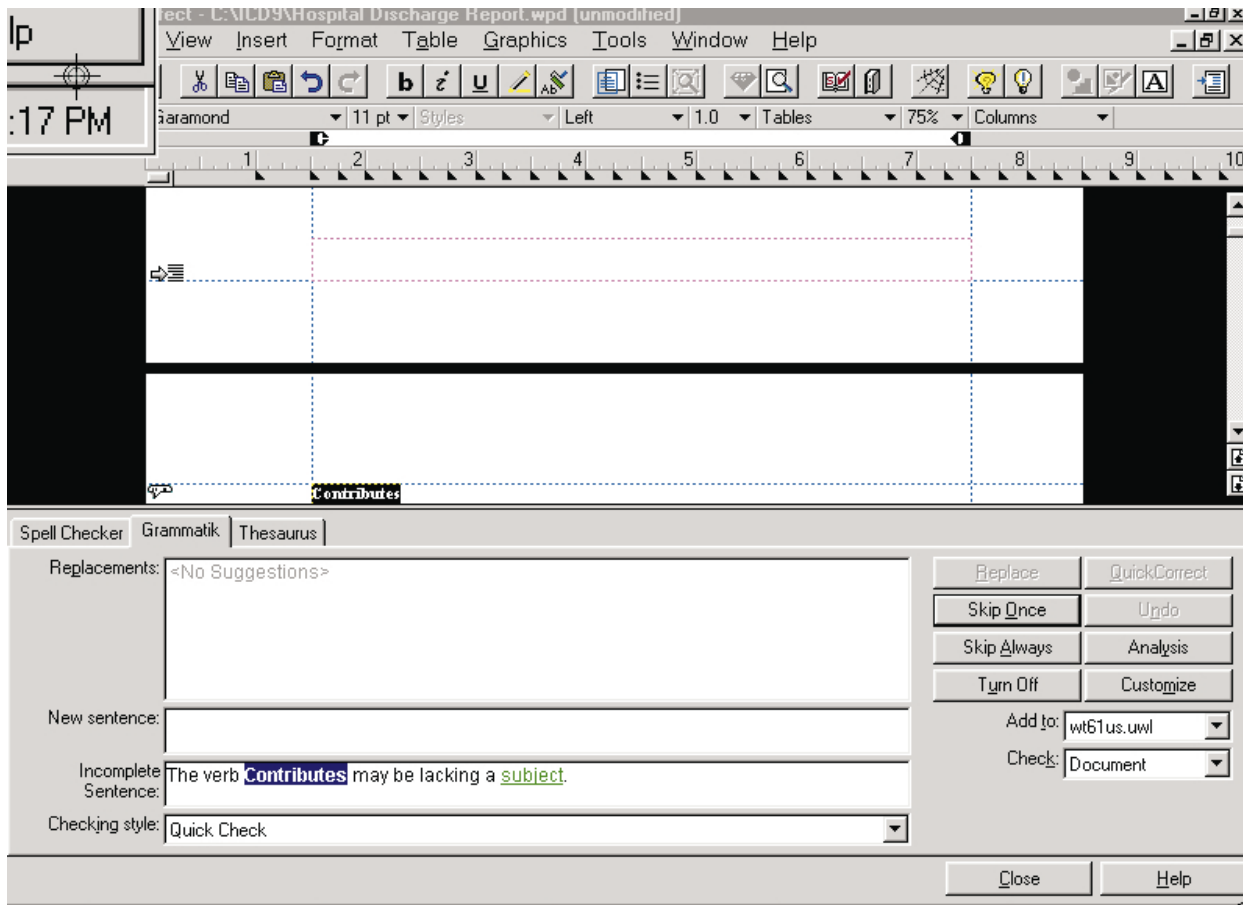|	
Words 1,881	F.R.E.S. 70
Wd/Sent....15.8	Grade 8
Sylla/Wd...1.42	USAdults...89%

- total word-length (Words)
- average sentence word-length (Wd/Sent)
- average syllables per word (Sylla/Wd)
- the Flesch Reading Ease Score (F.R.E.S.)
- reading grade level (Grade), and
- the percentage of American adults who can understand the text, if any (USAdults)

Armed with this data, readers may make an informed decision to either plunge headlong into the article or seek simpler pleasures. For F.R.E.S., the 40s are "fairly difficult," the 50s are "fairly easy," and the 60s and 70s are "easy."
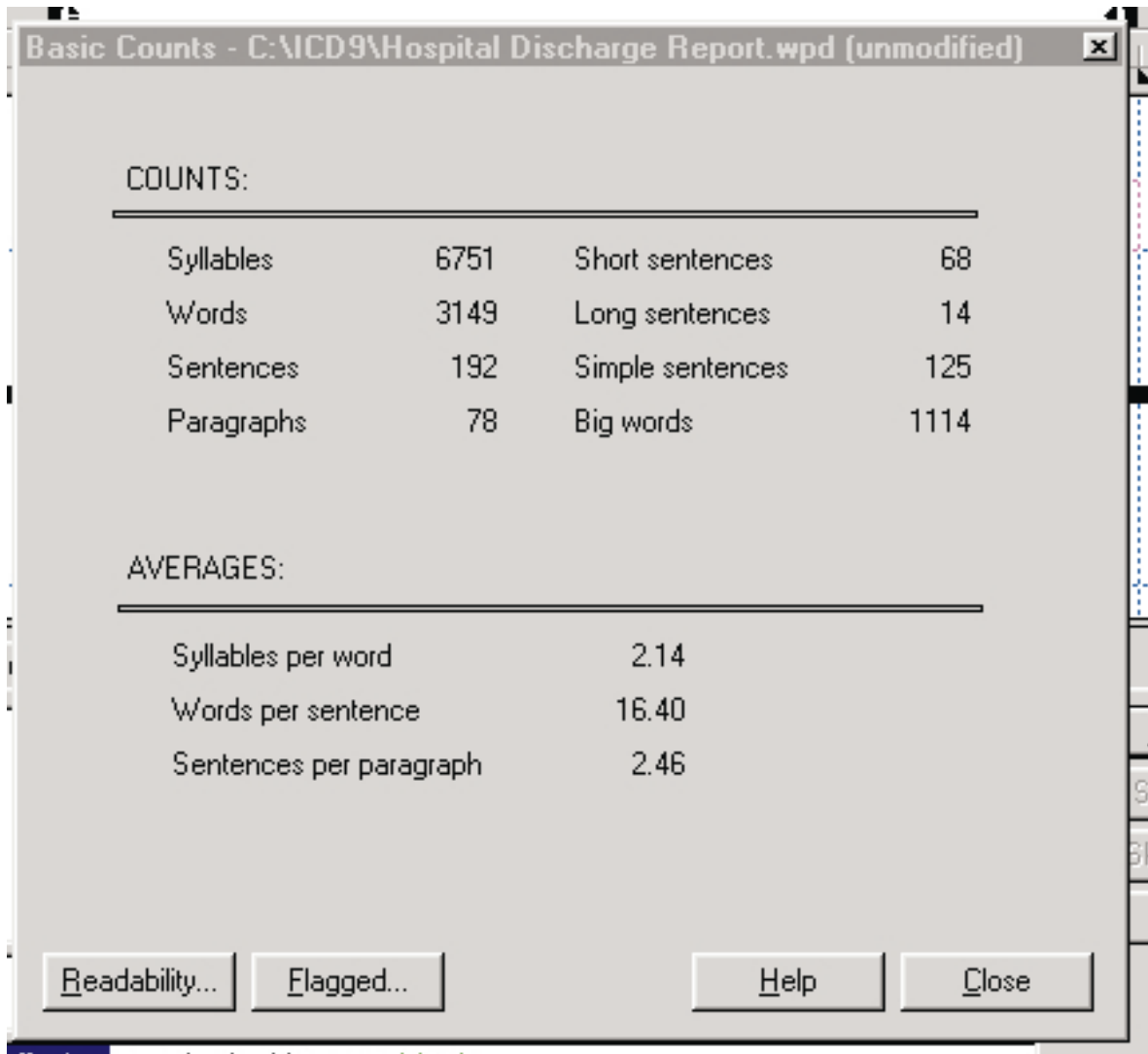
Please remember, "even as he created this system that evaluates text based on sentence length, Flesch [held] that short sentences can become dull to read; he recommended varying the sentence length, striving only to average about 17 words."

15

This screen appears in Wordperfect 7 under the Tools/Grammatik menu. You hit "Skip Once" to proceed through your document to the next suggestion.

Basic Counts - C:\ICD9\Hospital Discharge Report.wpd (unmodified)

COUNTS:

Syllables	6751	Short sentences	68
Words	3149	Long sentences	14
Sentences	192	Simple sentences	125
Paragraphs	78	Big words	1114

AVERAGES:

Syllables per word	2.14
Words per sentence	16.40
Sentences per paragraph	2.46

Readability...   Flagged...   Help   Close

By hitting "Analysis" from the previous screen, the above appears. You can use it to compare your document with the aforementioned guidelines. Hit "Readability" to make the next screen appear.

Readability - C:\ICD9\Hospital Discharge Report.wpd (unmodified) ☒

Comparison document: [Hemingway short story ▼] [Add Document...]

Flesch-Kincaid grade level:
- hospital — 16
- Hemingway — 4

Passive voice (% of finite verb phrases)
- hospital — 12
- Hemingway — 3

Sentence complexity (100 = very complex)
- hospital — 21
- Hemingway — 14

Vocabulary complexity (100 = very complex)
- hospital — 75
- Hemingway — 5

[Flagged...] [Basic Counts...] [Help] [Close]

Thesa...

Resu
Skip
Skip A
Ad
A
C

Contributes may be lacking a subject.

This screen compares your document with either a Hemingway short story, the 1040 tax instructions or the Gettysburg Address. The first bar graph is a variation of the Flesch ease of reading scale showing grade level.