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Rudolf Flesch

**The Art
of Readable
Writing**

An entertaining and stimulating guide
that will help everyone write
more clearly and effectively...
by the man **Time** called
“the Mr. Fix-It of writing.”

The Art of Readable Writing

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Readable Writing

Rudolf Flesch, Ph.D.

Foreword by
Alan J. Gould



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To Anne and Hugo

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Foreword

I THINK IT IS FAIR to say Rudolf Flesch's ideas have played a major part in lifting writing habits out of some of their oldest ruts.

This is important, among other reasons, because it coincides with an era of great crisis in human history. These are times in which it is supremely vital to convey ideas and report the news so that basic truths may be *better* understood by *more* people.

It is not sufficient to report news facts alone, or simply to tell what men say or nations do. The *meanings* must be set forth and events must be set in perspective. This must be done fairly, expertly, and thoroughly. It puts a premium on the techniques of Readability—that is, the writing methods that make a news report (a) as easy to read as it is interesting, (b) as well organized as it is expertly done, and (c) as clear to the average reader or listener as it is fair and balanced.

That's where Doctor Flesch comes in. His *Art of Readable Writing* is a notable and practical follow-up to his stimulating book on *The Art of Plain Talk*. He has put the spotlight on ways and means by which—in a confused world—we have a better chance of reducing the total content of confusion.

It is no exaggeration to say that the impact of Doctor Flesch's ideas on simpler, clearer ways of writing represents one of the most significant developments of our journalistic times. The effect has been to make more readable—and, therefore, more understandable—the combined output of the four great media of free expression in the United States: the newspapers, the magazines, radio and television.

This estimate, I should explain, is not a matter of detached observation or hearsay. I have worked closely with him during the past two years, as have others on the news staff of The Associated Press. As our consulting expert

on Readability, he has undertaken a series of critical studies of the world-wide news services of The Associated Press. His techniques form the basis of a concerted effort by the Associated Press staff to produce a day-by-day coverage of world news that's easier to read and easier for the average reader to understand.

The rapidity with which Doctor Flesch has achieved results on the American writing scene is due, I suggest, to two main factors: (a) his own skill in presenting a novel formula for measuring Readability, and (b) the extent to which it has been applied effectively to news writing. A Flesch axiom—"Write as you talk"—is now widely accepted by newspapermen who scoffed at the doctor's ideas when they began emerging from collegiate classrooms.

Doctor Flesch could write another book—and I hope he will—on his Readability debates with professional newsmen. Questions most often fired at him by the journalistic scoffers were like these: Why attempt to put news writing in a straitjacket, with a premium on short words and sentences? Why try to "write down" to the lower levels of reading intelligence? How can readers absorb the main facts of the news if the "Who-what-where-why-when-and-how" method of telling the news is subordinated to human interest treatment?

The answers are simple enough, as the doctor has demonstrated and our own Associated Press news staff has proved. The basic answer is this: newspaper readers or radio listeners have a *better* chance of grasping the news, or what it means, if it is told to them simply and clearly. This involves neither novelty nor a straitjacket. As one managing editor put it, in concluding a seminar of A.P. editors from all parts of the country: "The *New York News* used to say: 'Tell it to Sweeney and the Stuyvesants will understand. But tell it to the Stuyvesants and the Sweeneys may *not* understand.' "

Preface

THREE YEARS AGO I wrote a book called *The Art of Plain Talk*, in which I tried to popularize the concept of readability. The idea apparently struck a responsive chord and the book was a success.

Even before I wrote *The Art of Plain Talk* I realized that the plan of the book covered only a narrow field and that there was a place for a more general work on what might be called scientific rhetoric. (Later a friend remarked that *The Art of Plain Talk* was actually not about writing but about rewriting.) I confess that originally I had the ambition of seeing my name on the title page of a comprehensive scholarly work; but somehow the subject resisted such a treatment and what I came up with was another book for laymen with some bibliographical notes. *The Art of Readable Writing*, then, is neither a rehash of *The Art of Plain Talk* nor a sequel to it; rather, the two books complement each other. Those who have read the earlier book will find that there is hardly any overlapping; and those who haven't won't feel, I hope, that they have missed the first half of the show.

The new readability formula wasn't part of the original plan either. After a few years of experience with the formula that appeared in *The Art of Plain Talk*, a revision seemed worth while; and once I had worked out a new formula, I naturally decided to put it in my new book. Users of the old formula will want to know the whys and wherefores of the changes; these are explained in the notes to Chapter 14. Otherwise, I can only repeat what I said in the preface to *The Art of Plain Talk*: "Some readers, I am afraid, will expect a magic formula for good writing and will be disappointed with my simple yardstick. Others, with a passion for accuracy, will wallow in the little rules and computations but lose sight of the principles of plain English. What I hope for are readers who won't take the formula too seriously and won't expect from it more than a rough estimate."

Scholarly-minded readers will probably find the bibliographical references sketchy and feel that the book isn't well enough documented. I can only plead that the subject of scientific rhetoric is in its infancy and that experimental evidence is scattered and ill-assorted. (Until 1948 *Psychological Abstracts* didn't even have a special section on language and communication.) Doubtless there are many pertinent studies that I have missed; and many more are going to appear.

Readers of *The Art of Plain Talk* have been extraordinarily generous. They—as well as my students and friends—have helped me tremendously with references, suggestions, and comments. Many thanks to all of them.

R. F.

Dobbs Ferry, N. Y.
July 1948

Acknowledgments

MOST OF THE MATERIAL in this book, including my own readability formula, is based on accumulated research findings in many different fields of science. Directly or indirectly, I am therefore indebted to the work of hundreds of researchers; some of them are mentioned in the bibliography, but most of them are not. My own work goes back to the experience I gained in the now defunct Readability Laboratory of the American Association of Adult Education at Columbia University. I owe a large debt of gratitude to its director, Dr. Lyman Bryson.

I also owe thanks to the following persons and organizations for their gracious permission to quote copyrighted material:

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R. F.

The Art of Readable Writing

