Writers' Workshop

Who Are You Writing For?

In this Writers' Workshop you will:

- Learn how to judge the reading level of your writing.

Who Are You Writing For?

Mini-Lesson: Judging Your Writing's Reading Level

Vocabulary choices are just one factor that determines the readability, or reading level, of your writing. Sentence length and sentence complexity also affect how easy your work is to read. Most of the Wall Street Journal, for instance, is written at an intermediate reading level, while most of USA Today is written at a basic level. They are simply written for different audiences with different interests and differing amounts of time to spend reading each article.

Reading Levels of the Five Largest Papers in the United States by Circulation (2014)

	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced
Wall Street Journal	35%	57%	8%
USA Today	51%	37%	12%
New York Times	38%	52%	10%
Los Angeles Times	44%	54%	1%
Washington Post	32%	59%	9%

(This data was derived by measuring reading levels in each paper on one day using Google's Reading Level annotation tool. Results may vary slightly each day.)

Your publication should be written for your audience, not because they are more or less intelligent or sophisticated than the Washington Post's, but because you want them to come to you for clear, reliable and readable news in formats they can read in the time they have.

Word processing programs, including Microsoft Word, also allow you to analyze your language level. (You can turn on Word's Readability Statistics in Options under grammar and spelling.)

Apply It!

1. Analyze six samples of your own writing, three journalistic pieces and three pieces written for academic classes, using a tool such as the ones discussed above, then write a short analysis of your own work.
   - What grade level does your writing best serve?
   - Is there a difference between the levels in your academic writing and your journalistic writing?
   - In which type of work do you write for an older audience? Why?
   - What changes would you like to make in your journalistic writing?
2. Below are pairs of sentences that say about the same thing. Which one is the work of a powerful writer with a power vocabulary, and which one is the work of a mediocre writer?

   Sample A: When given the choice of using a long, Latinate word and a more brief, Anglo-Saxon expression, it is preferable to choose the less elongated vocabulary item.

   Sample B: Short words are best and the old words, when short, are best of all.

   Sample A: Under almost no conditions or in very few situations is it acceptable or warranted or justified to say the same thing over and over and over again, each time in a slightly different way. Do not repeat yourself or rephrase the same idea in different words because you failed to be clear in the previous word, phrase, sentence or paragraph or section

   Sample B: Eschew surplusage.

   Sample A: While the English and Language Arts and content area literacy components described herein are critical to college and career readiness, they do not define the whole of such readiness. Students require a wide-ranging, rigorous academic preparation and, particularly in the early grades, attention to such matters as social, emotional, and physical development and approaches to learning.

   Sample B: We need much more than book learning to be ready for life after high school.

Thanks to Winston Churchill for his comment on old, short words, and Samuel Clemens (Mr. Mark Twain) for his advice on eschewing surplusages, from "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses."

3. Now find a mediocre piece of writing, either from your own writing or the published writing of others, and rewrite it using the most efficient and powerful vocabulary and sentence structure possible.

   Seventeenth century writers such as John Locke and John Milton kept commonplace books, handwritten books in which they wrote quotations they valued. Serious students do the same. (Both W. H. Auden and C. S. Lewis both kept commonplace books.) As you write out the works of others, you will discover tools they use that are not part of your arsenal. Read two or three paragraphs of writing you understand and admire, then turn from your example and try to reproduce the work. Depending on the strength of your memory, you may need to lengthen the sample or shorten it. Your sample should be long enough that you do not memorize it but can remember it. Examine your version of the sample to see how the style of your version varies in

   - vocabulary;
   - expressions—ways of turning a phrase;
   - punctuation, capitalizations or spellings; and
   - sentence structure.

4. Choose three ways your version varies from the style of your model. Follow the procedure you learned in the Chapter 17 Writers' Workshop to move these stylistic tools from your receptive to your generative language.

   a. Write a ghost sentence, one that is a ghost of the original, duplicating your model's style.

   b. Write three more sentences imitating your model's style choices.