

What Is the Flesch Reading Ease Score?

Roxanne Miller 2017

The Flesch Reading Ease score is a tool for calculating the approximate reading level of English-language texts. It relies on the structure of the English language to provide the results. Sentence length and the length of the words within the sentence are both considered when calculating the Flesch readability score.

Short sentences and small words receive a higher score, while long sentences with longer words receive lower scores. Typically, a score of 100 or more means that the content is very simple and easy to read. A score of 60-70 means that the content is at the right level for intermediate readers at or above an 8th or 9th grade reading level, and a score of 0-30 is more suited for university work. This paragraph, for example, scores around a 57.9 on the Flesch Readability Scale, which means that it is in the average reading range of most high school graduates. (Cline, 2017)

Flesch-Kincaid Readability Tests

Flesch-Kincaid readability tests are two of the most popular ways to evaluate the reading complexity of a text. They are designed to score the readability of content.

The two tests are:

- Flesch-Reading Ease and
- Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level

Readability expert Rudolf Flesch created both tests. J. Peter Kincaid developed the latter test further for the US Navy. Both tests use the same basic measures: word length and sentence length, though they both give the measures different weighting.

Flesch-Reading Ease (developed in 1942)

The Flesch-reading ease test scores content out of 100 based on its readability. A 12-year-old could easily understand a score of 60 or above. University graduates best understand a score of 30 or below. (Maieli, 2015)

The formula is calculated as below:

$$206.835 - 1.015 \left(\frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) - 84.6 \left(\frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right)$$

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (developed in 1975)

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade level test calculates the required US school grade level a reader will require to understand a text. Research from the National Adult Literacy Survey found the average US adult reads at a 9th grade level. (NB 9th grade students are usually 14 years old.) (ibid.)

Therefore, when writing content it's important to write at a level readers will easily understand.

The formula is calculated as below:

$$0.39 \left(\frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) + 11.8 \left(\frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right) - 15.59$$

Scores can be interpreted as shown in the table below (Flesch, n.d.):

| Score | School Level | Notes |
|--------------|---------------------|--|
| 100.00-90.00 | 5th grade | Very easy to read. Easily understood by an average 11-year-old student. |
| 90.0–80.0 | 6th grade | Easy to read. Conversational English for consumers. |
| 80.0–70.0 | 7th grade | Fairly easy to read. (Average newspaper article score) |
| 70.0–60.0 | 8th & 9th grade | Plain English. Easily understood by 13- to 15-year-old students. (Average website article score) |
| 60.0–50.0 | 10th to 12th grade | Fairly difficult to read. Should be understood by most 16-18 year-old students. |
| 50.0–30.0 | University | Difficult to read. |
| 30.0–0.0 | University Graduate | Very difficult to read. Best understood by university graduates. |

Your target readability score will depend on **your intended audience** and on the content that you are delivering. For example, if you are providing information for elementary school children, you will want to keep your content at a lower reading level. On the other hand, if you are writing a university-level piece that involves complicated research and a deep understanding of a particular content area, you can allow your readability score to decrease substantially. You should always write for your audience, not for your score.

Some Problems with Readability Formulae

A problem with readability formulae is they ignore vocabulary. For example, the words *governmental* and *acephalous* (Greek for 'having a leader') both have 4 syllables and contribute to the syllable portion of the Flesch Readability statistic equally. However, *governmental* contains 12 letters thereby contributing to a lower score than the 10 letters in *acephalous*. The problem is that the test assumes a strong negative correlation between word length and readability.

Clearly, *acephalous* appears rarely in written (or spoken) English, whereas *governmental* is much more common. Another problem with these formulae is that it does not have a concrete definition of a word. In some instances, hyphenated words are calculated as one word, and in others as two words. Prefixes and suffixes, while they may not increase the difficulty of a word, do change the readability index. Other items that may cause a difference in the score include; foreign words, proper nouns, and numbers. Syllabification can be problematic as well. This is dependent on the dialect and dictionary used. The final problem is that many programs will calculate the scores differently. For example, Roxifyonline gives this text a score of 46.05 while Microsoft word gives it a score of 47.6 and a variety of online calculators gives it a score of 55.5, 57.4 and 63.1. (Roxifyonline uses the formula as shown above. We assume MSWord uses the same formula, but counts the words and/or syllables differently as the results are similar.)

Readability statistics provide a quick solution to evaluating audiences most likely to be able to read a manuscript, but there are some warnings. An ideal scale considers more than just calculations of words and syllables, and authors must consider the vocabulary used in texts.

These measures are simply given as an indication of the readability of your paper and should not be a final determiner of your paper. These scales were developed for native speakers of English, and not English language learners. Any score provided is for your information only and cannot be declared as absolutely correct. You should discuss this number with your instructors. This information is provided for your reference only.

References

- Cline, C. (2017, 5 9). *Flesch Reading Ease: Understanding It, Calculating It, Improving It*. Retrieved 7 23, 2017, from Blogmutt: <https://www.blogmutt.com/blog/flesch-reading-ease>
- Flesch, R. (n.d.). *How to Write Plain English*. Retrieved 6 30, 2017, from Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship: http://www.mang.canterbury.ac.nz/writing_guide/writing/flesch.shtml
- Maieli, G. (2015, 4 20). *Improve Customer Engagement – Use Flesch-Kincaid Readability Scores*. Retrieved 7 20, 2017, from VisibleThread: <https://www.visiblethread.com/2015/04/improve-customer-engagement-use-flesch-kincaid-readability-scores/>