



Tip Sheet: Calculating Reading Level

Creating effective health education material takes time and effort and requires a good understanding of the target audience you want to reach. To ensure that your new material will be effective, it must be written at or below the reading level of your target audience so that it is easily understood.

Examples of Reading Levels

■ **College Reading Level – Appropriate only for material written for health professionals**

There are over 4,000 chemicals in secondhand smoke, and 43 of those chemicals are carcinogenic. Secondhand smoke affects newborns adversely because their lungs are not fully developed. Newborns also have a higher respiratory rate than older children causing them to breathe in more of the chemicals in secondhand smoke.

■ **7th Grade Reading Level – Appropriate for material written for the general public**

Secondhand smoke has many harmful chemicals that cause cancer. Secondhand smoke hurts a newborn or small baby because their lungs are still growing. Babies breathe faster than older children so they breathe in more of the dangerous chemicals from the smoke.

■ **4th Grade Reading Level – Appropriate for material written for low literacy**

Secondhand smoke has lots of harmful chemicals that can hurt your children. Some of the chemicals can even cause cancer. Secondhand smoke is very bad for newborns. Their lungs are still growing. Babies breathe faster than older children. They breathe in more chemicals from the smoke. The smoke hurts your baby.

Tools that help measure reading levels

■ **Flesch-Kincaid/Word**

This formula is easiest to use because it is built into Microsoft Word. To turn it on:

- On the *Tools* menu, click *Options*, and then click the *Spelling & Grammar* tab.
- Select the *Check grammar with spelling* check box.
- Select the *Show readability statistics* check box, and then click *OK*.
- Click *Spelling and Grammar* on the standard toolbar to use. Reading level statistics will display following a check of spelling and grammar.

■ **SMOG Readability Formula**

The SMOG formula is also widely used. An online SMOG calculator is available at

<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/SMOG.html>

TIP: For an accurate test result, you may need to modify the text you are testing (not your actual text) so that there are periods at the end of all headers, subheads and bulleted or numbered items. This allows the calculator to “read” each as a complete thought rather than combining them into one long sentence.

■ **Testing non-English language material**

As a starting point, a readability test can be done using the English translation of the text. This is not a perfect method, of course, because the readability is affected by the translation. For a truly accurate reading level, combine this with pretesting questions for your target audience that focus on how well they understand the material.

If your material is still calculating too high, try these tips to lower the reading level:

- Replace long sentences with shorter sentences
- Replace long or complex words with short, simple words
- Replace numbers and statistics with words like “many,” or “most”
- Shorten overall length of text to eliminate any non-essential text

For more information, or personal assistance calculating the reading level of your material, CTCF-funded projects can contact TECC at (800) 258-9090 ext. 141 or by email at julieb@etr.org