



# Ink Matters

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## Aliteracy on the Rise

How do you read the newspaper? If you're like most adults, you read the headline, then the first paragraph or two, scan the subheadings and read the last paragraph. Then if your interest has been piqued—and you have the time—you read the whole article.

Our society is moving toward a visual environment that requires less and less reading. According to a 1999 Gallup poll, the number of people who don't read at all is rising. We are becoming a society of aliterates—people who can read but choose not to.

An overwhelming amount of information competes for our time. We manage it in four steps: scan, delete, toss, and archive until we find the time. If we find the time.

We look for the quickest way through: chunked information, headings, lists, signs, symbols, and icons. The Internet has changed the way we read. We scan, click, and search. Most of us don't read long text on a computer screen. We scan for relevance and if we want to read further, print it out.

Half the American population doesn't appreciate the

value of reading. Those who don't value reading, won't teach their children to value reading, and they help raise a nation of aliterates.

What can you do as an individual and as a communicator? Read. Encourage others to read. When you communicate with your customers, co-workers, vendors, and others, consider their information needs and strive to meet them.

For more information about aliteracy, go to <http://havenworks.com/vocabulary/a-z/a/aliteracy/>.

"It's wicked. It's tearing apart our culture. People who have stopped reading base their future decisions on what they used to know."

—Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, speaking about aliteracy

## Do a Readability Check-Up

When you are writing marketing or other communication materials, they will be most effective if they are easy to read for your intended audience.

You can quickly assess the reading level of your materials using one of several tools, but the easiest one available comes with Microsoft Word.

On your toolbar, go to Tools,

Options, then click on the Spelling and Grammar tab. Check the Show Readability Statistics box.

When you do a spell-check, you will see the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level scores.

These formulas offers a quick assessment, but keep in mind their accuracy is debated among readability experts.

The grade level assessment can be

as much as two grades off either way. However, the reading ease score is more reliable than the grade level score. A score of 60 to 100 means your document ranges between standard (a score of 60) and very easy to read (100).

The reading scores are only a start to assessing your document. Look at the content as well. You don't want to end up with easy-to-read gibberish.

### Beyond Words:

Other Factors that Impact Readability

1. **Graphics.** Make sure they illustrate your point.
2. **Layout.** Should work well with content.
3. **Content.** Should be relevant to the topic.

Kristina Anderson

Writer, Editor, Consultant

828 19th Avenue South  
Seattle, WA 98144

206.322.7198

kristina@  
easyreadcopywriting.com

Kristina Anderson has been in the freelance writing and editing business since 1990. Her wide range of experience includes managing retail stores, volunteers, and nonprofit programs. She works with health promotion publishers, health providers, nonprofit organizations, literacy organizations, marketing agencies, educational institutions, technical companies, corporations, book publishers, and authors. Her expertise includes writing for low-literacy and limited English-speaking audiences and assessing readability and literacy levels of printed materials.

Kristina works at home in the Central District. She lives with two dogs, one cat, and her wonderful, entertaining teenage son, Pepper. She's a voracious reader, book award juror, community volunteer, and not a master gardener, but she loves it anyway.

"Recent findings from the 2000 Census of Population have revealed that the nation experienced the greatest wave of new foreign immigration in its history, with nearly 14 million new immigrants arriving on its shores between 1990 and 2000. Many of these new immigrants were relatively young and of working age and, especially among males, they were strongly attached to the labor market."

—Education & the Workforce Immigration Report, Dec. 2002. <http://www.brtable.org/document.cfm/781>

#### About making assumptions...

An older immigrant woman is ill and goes to her doctor. The diagnosis is lung cancer. As Americans, we assume the patient will be upset to hear she has lung cancer, but instead, she is relieved—she feared she had tuberculosis. With a diagnosis of cancer, she can still be around her family. With TB, she would have to be isolated from her family, which for her, would be a fate worse than dying.

## Preserving Culture

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The complexion of your workplace, your marketplace, and the street where you live is changing. As more people from other countries settle in the U.S., the greater the need is to widen our definition of culture. As immigrants adjust to living in America, the definition of their culture changes.

Ellen Howard, who is head librarian at University of Washington's K.K. Sherwood Library at Harborview Medical Center, has been involved in health-related research projects that work with immigrant communities in the Seattle area. Some of this work is reflected in the content of EthnoMed at [www.ethnomed.org](http://www.ethnomed.org).

The immigrant and refugee communities are changing very quickly. "The young people are moving so fast socially, while the older people are remaining more traditional," Howard says. "They encounter many demands on their lives and need more and more services in order to survive

in this country."

One focus of Howard's work concerns the access to and distribution of health information for patients, especially those who have been traditionally underserved. She has several pearls of wisdom to share as a result of her work with culturally diverse communities:

- \* Don't assume anything.
- \* Identify your own cultural values first. Recognize your own cultural biases (we all have them), and think about your own attitudes.
- \* Look at your family traditions and talk to community members about theirs.
- \* *Listen* to what you hear.
- \* Allow people to show you what *they* want.
- \* And, keep in mind that not everyone learns the same way you do—there are

a variety of learning styles.

Many cultures use storytelling as a method for teaching and passing down information. "For one thing, storytelling appeals to most people," says Howard, "but we also remember best through stories. They provide a concrete image of the abstract."

Howard suggests considering the use of pictures or sound instead of, or in addition to, written materials, and letting people interact with the information, if possible. Ask open-ended questions like "What do you think about this? How do you feel about that? What are the five things you most want to know?" And she has one more tip: Approach teaching other cultures through food, because food is a common denominator.

"Diversity creates one and only one thing: opportunity."  
—Tom Peters, *The Pursuit of Wow!*