



Style Guide: Best Practices in Formatting

According to Colin Wheildon, author of *Type & Layout: Are You Communicating or Just Making Pretty Shapes*, it's possible that 75% of your readers attempting to access your content (whether online, in print, or via email) will disregard what you're saying based solely on the type of font you choose. That's right—75%!

That's why it's critically important to choose fonts that are clean and accessible and to choose a layout that is visual but not busy. Don't try to pack too much into your layout, or else you may run the risk of your message being lost.

First, let's look at the differences between a “serif” and “sans serif” font.

Serif fonts are more embellished, with small lines attached to the end of a stroke in a letter or symbol. Popular serif fonts include Times New Roman, Georgia, and Garamond. Many books, newspaper, and magazines use a serif font. In print mediums, serif fonts are often easier to read.

Sans serif fonts don't have the added embellishments. These fonts are often used in advertisements, and are generally easier to read. In print, sans serif fonts are often used as a headline, whereas serif fonts are used for the body text. Popular sans serif fonts include Helvetica, Arial, and Calibri.

There are some simple best practices in formatting print, online, and email communications for your organization. These best practices will make your information easier to understand and more accessible to the average reader.

When do I use a serif font like Times New Roman or Garamond?

For print items, it's suggested to utilize serif fonts for brochures, donation letters in the mail, etc. However, it's still recommended to use sans serif fonts for your headlines, subheadings, etc. Use at least a 12 or 14-point font. The larger your font size, the easier your content is to read. For this particular paper, we have chosen a 14-point font.

When do I use a sans serif font like Arial or Calibri?

For online (like your website or email newsletters), sans serif is the way to go. As mentioned above, use sans serif fonts for headlines and subheadings, too. A larger font-size is also recommended for online reading—we recommend at least a 14-point font. Arial font is a great choice for online readability!

Note: If you’re going to have something that could be viewed either in print OR online (like a PDF document uploaded onto your website, for example), we recommend going with a sans serif font. When in doubt, sans serif is the best option!

Serif Fonts	Sans Serif Fonts
Times New Roman	Arial
Garamond	Calibri
Georgia	Verdana

Check your readability.

Did you know that it’s possible to check the reading level of your content using the program Microsoft Word?

In Microsoft Word, there is a way to check what’s known as the “Flesch-Kincaid” readability. Flesch-Kincaid was developed in the 1970s by the U.S. Navy. This formula was first used by the Army to discover whether or not its technical manuals were easy to read. Since then, it’s become a common requirement throughout the U.S. to have legal documents (such as insurance policies) written at no higher than a 9th grade reading level.

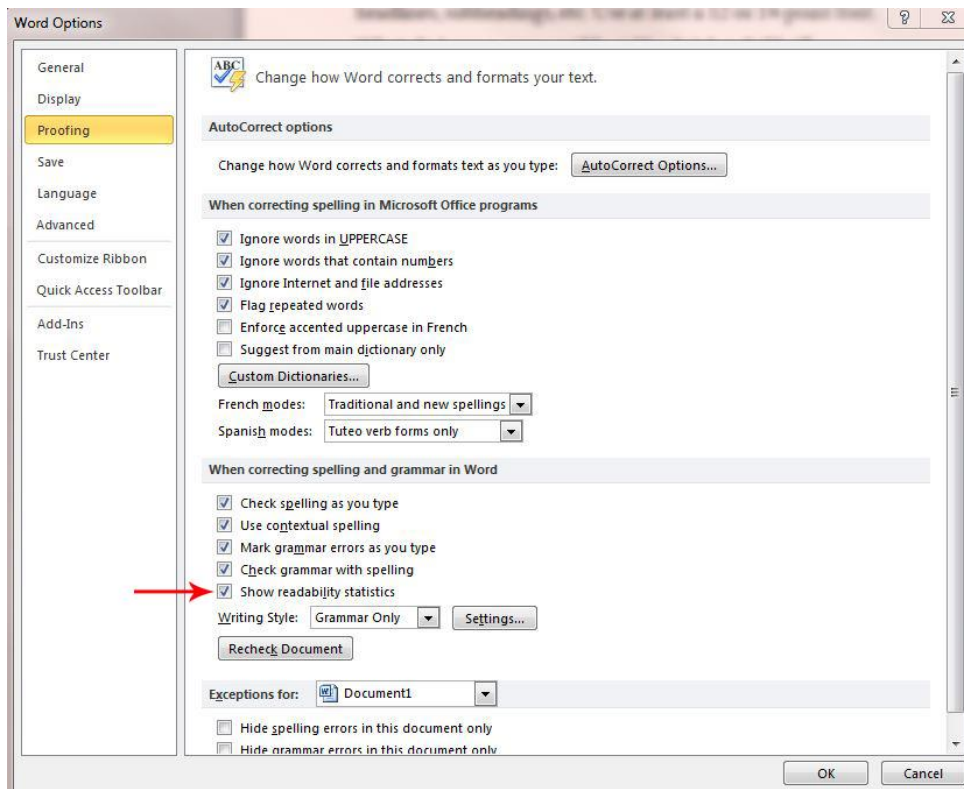
We recommend making sure that all your materials—whether print, online, or email—are readable for an 8th grade reading level. This will make your content easier to read for a larger audience.

To check the reading level in Microsoft Word, you’ll need to first go into the Microsoft Word program. This is the easiest way to check your readability, although it may require you to copy and paste from other formats (like your website or an electronic newsletter) into Microsoft Word to check the reading level.

Once you’ve opened the Microsoft Word program, click on the “tools” (or “review”) button at the top of your screen. Then click on the “spelling & grammar” tab,

followed by clicking on “options.” You’ll want to select the “proofing” tab if it doesn’t automatically come up.

Under the subheading “grammar,” make sure that the tab for “show readability statistics” is checked. See screen shot below:



With the “show readability statistics” option checked, you will get a report whenever you perform a spell check in Microsoft Word. Once a spell check is performed, your readability should automatically be included along with your word counts and averages under the label “readability.” (See screen shot on the next page.)

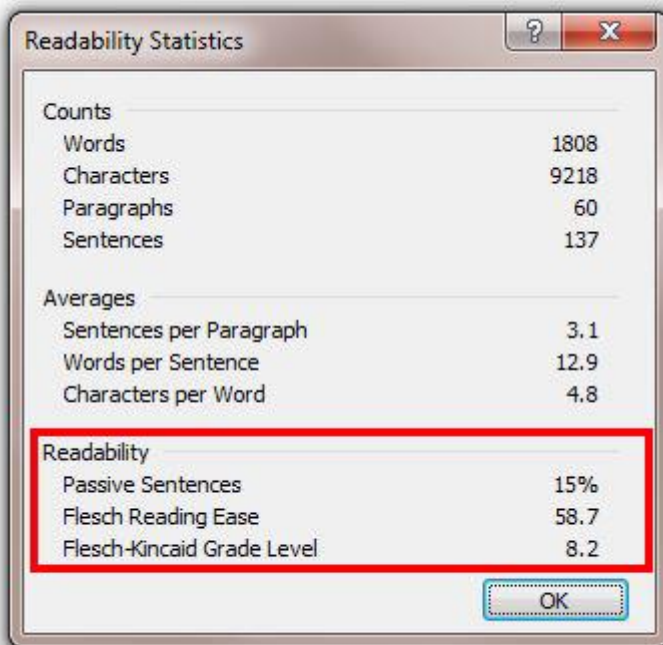
Under the “readability” label there are three items to pay attention to. The first is “passive sentences.” The lower this percentage the better (20% or less), because it means you’re writing in a much more clear and concise way. When we write in what’s called “active voice,” it’s easier for a reader to understand your content.

Then look at the “Flesch Reading Ease.” Texts that have a high Flesch Reading Ease score are easier to read with shorter sentences and words. For the reading level we’re trying to achieve (8th grade), your Flesch Reading Ease score should be of 60-70 or

lower. A score of 60-70 means your content is easily understood by 13-15 year old students and higher.

Finally, look at the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. This is a formula that determines how many number of years of education are usually required to understand your text. The score is given as a U.S. grade level, which allows you to easily judge the reading level of your content. For instance, if your content is rated as a 7.5 on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level index on Microsoft Word, this means the reading level of your content is somewhere between 7th and 8th grade. As previously stated, 8th grade reading level—a level commonly referred to as “plain English”—is what we’re shooting for.

Here is a screenshot of the readability of this handout. You’ll notice that we have met all the requirements outlined above.



This is a simple test you can do for any brochures, publications, website information, email newsletters, and more. Just remember that if you are checking the readability of content on the web, you’ll have to copy and paste it into Microsoft Word first.

Avoid putting text on colorful backgrounds that make it difficult to read.

While colorful backgrounds make great visuals, putting text over these images make the information harder to read.

The website www.canva.com has some great templates available to help you overlay text on colorful backgrounds that look clean and professional. This easy-to-use website has some great templates available that make design simple and easy for everyone. While some of the designs cost money to use, many of them are free.

Keep it simple. White space is your friend.

When trying to design a project or brochure, it's easy for us to get carried away. This is especially true when learning new programs. However, keep in mind that simpler is usually better. More extravagant designs tend to make your content less readable. Filling up white space with color can distract from your content.

Understand how people view your website and electronic newsletters.

Believe it or not, there's a science to how people view websites online. Website visitors absorb content in a matter of seconds, and will view the page from left to right.

More important items should be placed toward the top of your page. This is a great place for a logo or a donate button. Studies have shown that the left half of your page is the most important.

The second-most viewed portion is the bottom of the page. This is a great place for a call to action. Smaller chunks of information are best, and easier for a reader to digest. Break up your content into short paragraphs, provide headings, use bullets, and create numbered lists.

You should have lots of white space as a key element to your web design. This gives the eyes a chance to "rest" between blocks of information.

Surprisingly, web banners are not terribly effective. These banners are embedded usually at the top of a webpage. They may have scrolling graphics and text on them, with the intention to attract more traffic and "clicks."



Eye tracking studies have shown that web banners are almost universally ignored. So if the most important information on your website is contained in a series of web banners, there's a good chance that no one is clicking on it.

Another element is to include pictures of people. Experts agree that people visiting your website like to look at someone else they can identify with.

You can purchase stock photos of people from www.iStockphoto.com or www.shutterstock.com if you don't have any other photo options.

Be sure that the pictures you use are inclusive of everyone your agency serves. This includes people of color; older adults; men; younger people and children; lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people and/or couples; and others.

For your consideration—this paper was written in 14-point font. It is written in an 8th grade reading level to make it easier to read. The body text is written in Garamond serif font; the headings and subheadings are written in Calibri sans serif font

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Resources

www.canva.com

Canva makes design simple for everyone. Create designs for Web or print: blog graphics, presentations, Facebook covers, flyers, posters, invitations and so much more. While some of the designs cost money to use, many of them are free.

www.istockphoto.com

iStock is an online, royalty free stock photography provider offering millions of photos, illustrations, clip art, videos and audio tracks. Some of the content available on iStock is free. Users can purchase images and/or video, which can then be used in brochures, publications, websites, and more without having to worry about infringing on copyrights.

www.shutterstock.com

Like iStock, Shutterstock provides royalty free stock photography, stock footage, stock music, and editing tools. Some of the content available on Shutterstock is free, and users can sign up and get free content every week. Users can purchase images and/or videos, which can then be used in brochures, publications, websites, and more without having to worry about infringing on copyrights.

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