



# Ink Matters

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## Lessons Learned from Lowering Readability

Twenty years ago, securing my infant son in his car seat was easy. He faced forward, his car seat secured with a seat belt. Today, it's much more complicated and for a good reason: It saves lives.

When Peg-Perego USA, Inc. hired EasyRead Copywriting and Cognition Studios to rewrite and reillustrate their infant car seat manual so it was easier to read and understand, we faced various seat belt configurations, vehicle designs, and federal regulations, all which impacted readability levels.

I talked to Tim Harris, Manager of Engineering at Peg-Perego, several months after we completed the project to ask him about his experiences with the revision process.

*What led you to the decision to revise your manual so it would be easier to read and understand?*

It was a combination of things. Primarily, it was conversations in the industry among agencies, child

safety groups, and online discussions with Child Passenger Safety (CPS) Inspectors about the need for easier instructions.

*What problems were you hoping the new manual would address?*

We wanted to provide the best instruction manual possible so that consumers would install the seat correctly. We want them to read it, understand it, and keep it for future reference.

*Have you received any feedback on the new version?*

Yes. Several individuals and organizations reviewed it and found it easier to read. They liked the layout, spacing, and language. Making it easier to read had one downfall, however. It's much bigger, so we had to build a new mold for storing it on the base (of the car seat), which delayed production.

*What are some of the lessons you learned from this process of lowering the reading level?*

I hadn't realized how many little things there are to track. There were lots of details, and I had to carefully go back through the manual with every revision to make sure that everything was there that needed to be there. And I had to wear different hats—an engineer hat, an instruction sheet hat, a labels hat, a warnings hat. There were very complex things we had to explain, like the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) requirements for instructions, which are hard to explain at a 6th grade level.

*Has the process of rewriting your car seat manual influenced the readability of other documents and manuals in your company?*

Yes, it has influenced how we see the other manuals we write, but the car seat was the most critical to revise because it is so important that parents understand the design and function of the seat in order to install it properly.

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—Tim Harris,  
Manager of Engineering at Peg-Perego USA., Inc.

*"Instructions for installing child safety seats in cars are written in language too difficult for many adults to understand, researchers say. Such manuals are written at a tenth-grade reading level on average, according to a new study, while data suggest that nearly a quarter of U.S. adults read at or below a fifth-grade level, and at least 25 percent read at about an eighth-grade level."*

—Chicago AP, 2003



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Kristina Anderson has been in the freelance writing and editing business since 1990. Her wide range of experience includes managing bookstores, 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.

### Finding the Right Words

October is Health Literacy Month, and 2004 marked the fourth year for recognizing and celebrating plain language in health care communication. Thanks to Helen Osborne ([www.healthliteracy.com](http://www.healthliteracy.com)) and other dedicated people around the country, more and more health care providers, and others working in the health and literacy fields, have a greater awareness of the need for information written in plain language—especially information that impacts our daily lives.

**Together, we are “finding the right words for better health.”**

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## Telling a Story Through Illustration

When Burke Visuals and EasyRead Copywriting collaborated on producing a 5-minute video on genetic reproductive technology, the client’s instructions were specific: Make the technology easy to understand.

I talked with Christopher Burke, an illustrator, animator, and designer for science, medical and technology companies, about how he approaches working with complicated information for technical and novice audiences. Here are the highlights of our conversation.

“Whether your audience is professional or not, an illustrator has to make sure in both cases, that content always comes first,” he says. “You have to be certain that the way you tell a story doesn’t overtake the story itself. It’s an intuitive thing, depending on use.”

Burke says a professional audience is used to thinking about things in a certain way, so when working on an illustration, he must keep that point of view in

mind or the intended audience might lose their frame of reference when they see the illustration. “In school, they teach us to illustrate from the doctor’s point of view, but we have to decide if that point of view is going to provide enough information to tell the story.”

For example, Burke illustrated a neurosurgical procedure based on research and his observation of that procedure. When he showed the neurosurgeon his illustration, the physician was somewhat disoriented because it had been drawn from a different perspective than his own. But the physician soon realized the illustration conveyed concepts that could not be discerned from a traditional viewpoint. “Since this was for a professional audience, I needed to be accurate to what the doctor sees. But I also had to consider other approaches to tell the story. The professional audience must feel the illustration is not only medically accurate but also clear in its communi-

tion.”

For the lay audience, Burke says clarity is just as important, but in a different way. “The novice is not caught up in technical detail, so I usually work toward a more graphic representation of the subject matter, such as showing DNA as rungs of a ladder rather than molecular structures. The challenge in illustrating for this audience is to take the highly complex information and distill it down so that it’s clear.”

In the video on reproductive technology, Burke created visuals to show how parents pass their genes down to their children. “It took a lot of work to make it look simple, but if you listened to the narrator, he was conveying complex information.”

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