



Ink Matters

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Sitting in the Audience

Most writers are natural people watchers. Observing our surroundings is fuel for the next short story, novel, or essay. We watch, listen, and jot down conversations or one-liners that can lead to a great piece of writing.

But, you say, that applies only to fiction writers. Not necessarily, I say. Although my goal as a writer is to meet the needs of my clients, accomplishing that means first meeting the needs of the reader.

A writer's work might be lively, bril-

liant, creative...all good things...but if the message doesn't appeal to the intended audience, it won't get read.

What motivates a person to read what you write? To start, it must be relevant to the reader. And how do you know what's relevant? You take a seat in the audience.

You people watch. You listen to conversations. You look at how people dress, what they eat, and where they work. What's their daily life like? What keeps them up at night? What

drives their decisions?

And ask yourself why should they care about your subject matter. Writers need to determine what's important to their audience and write to that. If it's not relevant to readers' daily lives, they won't read it.

The challenge is to frame your message so it piques the reader's interest and hits home with a new way of looking at an old problem, or revealing a problem they didn't know they had.

Get to know your audience

What is their age, sex, economics, education, cultural, social and political background?

How familiar are they with the subject matter?

What's the context of delivery? (Web, print, radio, live presentation)

How does your audience best process information?

A Case in Point

You are conducting a focus group at 7pm on a Wednesday evening. Most participants work during the day and have families, so they will be arriving perhaps a little frazzled, maybe a little hungry, and definitely ready to answer your questions, collect their reward for participating,

and get back home.

So what do you do to make them comfortable and get the most out of your interviewing methods?

Food is #1. Regardless of the time of day you are polling your audience, provide food and drink. If it's early morning, be sure you put that coffee pot on. Ba-

gels and cream cheese are a good choice for snacks day or night.

Respect their time is #2. Start on time and finish as promised.

And #3? Make it easy for them to participate. Show them you value their opinion, and encourage them to speak up.

When running a focus group:

1. Keep the discussion on track without cramping the flow of ideas and comments.
2. Ideally, run more than one focus group to get a rounded sample.



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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.

Hinds County, Mississippi Judge Houston J. Patton has a standing order for all youth offenders who come before his court: They must read and complete a book report. His version of tough love grew out of frustration at seeing juvenile offenders enter the justice system with few, if any, reading skills.

“You cannot succeed in school and life if you can’t read,” Patton said.

According to the US Department of Education, 60% of prison inmates are illiterate and 85% of juvenile offenders have reading problems.

—“Youth Court Judge Gets Tough on Illiteracy” by Jimmie E. Gates, The Clarion-Ledger Mississippi News

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What's in a Readability Formula?

If you use the readability function in Microsoft Word, you will see two measurements listed: the Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. The reading ease score falls within a scale of 0 to 100. Zero is unreadable; 100 is very readable. The grade level score, on the other hand, rates your document by grade.

The Flesch-Kincaid readability formula is just one of several currently in use. Rudolf Flesch developed his formula in the early 1940s. His research, he says, was based on how the human mind works: When reading, your eyes

and mind focus on sequential points on the page and decide what the words mean. Only when you get to a major punctuation mark does your mind stop, summarize, and find meaning in what you've read.

Flesch's formula is based on sentence length and the number of syllables in a word. The longer the sentence, the harder it is for the reader to retain what is read and extract meaning. By shortening sentences and simplifying words, the mind is better able to grasp and retain meaning.

Readability formulas offer a

quick assessment, but keep in mind that their accuracy and valid use are debated among readability experts.

Below is a list of reading materials tested by Rudolf Flesch (average scores of random samples)

Reader's Digest	65
Sports Illustrated	63
Time	52
Newsweek	50
Wall Street Journal	43
New York Times	39
Auto insurance policy	10
Internal Revenue Code	-6

Grade levels:

100 to 70 = Very readable (5-7)

60 to 40 = Fairly difficult (10-12)

30 to 0 = Very difficult (College +)