



Five simple steps to start the conversation

How plain language benefits the water industry

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Introduction

Is your content 'talking' to your audience?

The whole point of marketing is to start a one-on-one conversation between two people. Ultimately a conversation between your sales person and their business manager.

In the water industry your product is complex and technical. That's fine. But if your content is hard to understand the conversation may never get started. You need to simplify the language in your content to make your complex, technical product understandable.

In this series of posts, we look at how to simplify your writing using five simple steps. But first we should understand how readability is assessed.

Readability: Flesch Kincaid (FK) Explained

One of the most commonly used readability assessments is the Flesch Kincaid (FK) readability assessment. The FK assessment was originally developed to assess the difficulty of reading materials for upper elementary through secondary grade students. Current word-processing software uses the FK test to describe the readability of the text. It is a scale based on a formula.

The FK formula looks at these factors in a piece of writing:

- **# of letters per word:** more letters, more difficult to read.
- **# of words per sentence:** more words, more difficult to read.
- **# of sentences per paragraph:** more sentences, more difficult to read.
- **% passive sentences:** more passive sentences, more difficult to read.

Word processing software can generally review documents and report on two FK parameters:

- Flesch reading ease, and
- FK grade level.

The Flesch reading ease assessment is reported as a percent and the higher the better. And for persuasive content writing, a FK grade level score of 8 or less is best.

But beware! While the FK score can help you improve the clarity of your writing, it does have drawbacks. Jargon and complex technical terms, for instance. Of course, you should avoid jargon and technical terms as much as possible but sometimes it just can't be helped. Just be aware that your FK score may creep up if you rely too much on these less familiar and less used terms.

Remember, a bad readability score does mean reading will be difficulty. But a good readability score does not in itself mean the writing was good.

Now on to Step #1 of 5 that will start you on your road to content that is easily understood.

SIMPLICITY

SIMPLE WRITING IS
MORE BELIEVEABLE
THAN COMPLEX
WRITING.

MARK FORD

Step #1: Find one emotionally compelling idea

The most powerful aid to clear, concise writing is to identify an emotionally compelling idea. A single idea that engages the reader or listener on two levels: emotionally and rationally.

It doesn't have to be factual. But it does need to feel like it is or should be true. It must be so emotionally attractive the reader wants to believe it.

Your emotionally compelling idea should generate a feeling of discovery. A feeling that your reader is discovering something new and/or useful to think about and share.



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How to find that emotionally compelling idea

There is no substitute for research. You need to know the topic - your product - and its features and benefits. You need to know your audience and their needs.

It always helps to start with a brainstorming session. Whether alone or with your team, think about all the features and benefits of your product. If an emotionally compelling idea doesn't jump off the page, which it most likely won't, more research is required.

After further research into features/benefits and your audience's needs, you then repeat the brainstorming activity. Once you really understand the values and benefits, one benefit will stand out. Turn that one benefit into an emotionally compelling idea.

Put that emotionally compelling idea right up front

First things first. By putting your main message right up front, your reader is more likely to come away with at least that message. You can help your reader by:

- Stating the subject of an email in the subject line.
- Including an executive summary with a white paper.
- Stating the basic facts about a news item in the first sentence or two of a news release.

An introduction is also helpful, regardless of the length of your document.

Studies have shown that people like to know what they're in for right from the start. Put your emotionally compelling idea right up front. In primary school, they taught us that when writing a report, you should:

Tell them what you are **going to tell them**,
tell them,
then tell them **what you told them**.

It still applies today. Put the emotionally compelling idea up front and draw your audience through to the call-to-action.

CONTENT MARKETING

THE GOAL OF CONTENT
MARKETING IS TO
CREATE AN EMOTION
THAT LEADS TO
ENGAGEMENT, TRUST,
AND ... ACTION.

MARK SCHAEFER



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Step #2: Use an easy-to-read style

When you use an easy-to-read style, your reader can focus on your message rather than muddling through dense text. These three tricks can help you develop that easy-to-read style.

Trick #1: Use personal pronouns

Using personal pronouns gives your writing a conversational tone. Personal pronouns seem to connect the reader to the writer. And that conversational tone helps your reader focus on your message rather than your language.

Just be sure that personal pronouns are right for the content. It may not be appropriate in every situation.

Trick #2: Avoid jargon

It's easy to be drawn to words that are common in your industry. But are they common to your audience? When writing for non-specialists and you have a choice between words, use the common, everyday word.

A couple further pointers on word choice:

- **Use positive words.** Negatives like *don't* in front of a verb can make some readers stumble.
- **Avoid long strings of nouns.** Sentences with several nouns in a row can be difficult to navigate.
- **Use inclusive language.** Unless your document is about men, don't use only male pronouns (he, his).

Sometimes you may have to use a technical term, even when you're writing for non-specialists. In that case, choose words that will help your readers.

Trick #3: Avoid padding with words like *very*, *really*, *actually*, or *carefully*

These words don't serve any purpose. Keep it simple, keep it easy to understand.

JARGON

WORDS AND PHRASES
USED BY PARTICULAR
GROUPS OF PEOPLE, ESP.
IN THEIR WORK, THAT
ARE NOT GENERALLY
UNDERSTOOD.

CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY



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Step #3: Keep it concise and to the point

When writing about complex technical subjects, you need to construct your sentences carefully. Direct, simple sentences will help get your point across. In fact, long sentences almost always have complex grammatical structures. This puts a strain on the reader's immediate memory. The reader has to retain several parts of each sentence before he can combine them into a meaningful whole.

Here are a few tricks to help you keep concise and to the point:

Trick #1: Keep sentences and paragraphs short.

The average length of your sentences should be 20 words or fewer

Trick #2: Sentences should focus on one idea

Keep it simple. Cover only one idea per sentence and one theme per paragraph. Get to the point; don't wander around first.

Trick #3: Use the active voice

Use the active voice. The passive voice tends to seem evasive:

The standards were breached.

Who breached the standards? As a reader, you might think: *Is the writer trying to hide something from me?* If you don't want to appear to be hiding something, you should use active voice:

The refinery breached a water quality standard.

Step #4: Make it skim-able

You can make your document more user-friendly by providing cues that promote skimming. There are a couple tricks you can use to help these readers out.



Trick #1: Use headings

Headings show your readers how your document is organized. And they let your reader skim the text to find the information they're looking for. Readers on the Internet tend to move on to something else if they don't find what they're looking for quickly. In longer documents, add a table of contents at the beginning, too.

There are several ways to write a heading. You can state it as a question, as a phrase or as a declarative sentence:

- Question. "Are there two kinds of people in the world?"
- Phrase. "Two kinds of people in the world"
- Declarative sentence. "There are two kinds of people in the world."

Trick #2: Break up blocks of text with bulleted/numbered lists

Lists are easy for readers to skim. Choose numbers when presenting a list with items in a specific sequence or rank order. Use bullets when the items listed are equivalent in importance.

These tricks improve readability because:

- They make it easier for readers to find what they want.
- They make your content less intimidating by breaking it up visually.

Step #5: Structure it to soothe the reader's eye

Long blocks of text can intimidate readers. Making content easy to read in a visual sense will make it easier for the reader to understand your key message.

You can soothe the reader's eye by using white space. Use adequate margins and space between sections. Keep paragraphs short. The lists we discussed last week help break up text and provide relief to the eye as well as enhancing its skim-ability.

Visual tools can help explain your content.

- **Infographics** provide a clear visual representation of data, relationships, or ideas.
- **Tables** can help comparisons and show relationships without using a lot of text.
- **Lists** group similar items. Numbered lists are ideal for items that are sequenced or ranked; other lists may be bulleted.



- Other visual tools include **inserts, charts, maps, and checklists.**

Make sure the tool you use matches your content and the needs of your audience. You can't explain everything with a pie chart!

Conclusion

In this series we have seen how plain language improves understanding. Understanding leads to trust, and ultimately to action from your prospect. Take these 5 simple steps to start the conversation:

1. Find one compelling idea.
2. Use an easy-to-read style.
3. Keep it concise and to the point.
4. Make it skim-able
5. Structure it to soothe the reader's eye.

To keep these simple steps in mind while writing, download and print the handy checklist:

[CHECKLIST] 5 Simple Steps to Start the Conversation

<https://www.watercopy.com/checklist-readability/>

Contact Water Copy for all your content writing requirements.

<https://www.watercopy.com/expert-content-writer-contact/>



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