

Review Articles

Formula for Writing

The Art of Plain Talk. By Rudolf Flesch. New York, Harper, 1946. xiii, 210p.

How to write readable English is the main topic of this compact little volume. It is a skilfully written popularization of the author's doctoral dissertation, *Marks of a Readable Style* (Teachers College, Columbia University, 1943). It contains many good hints illustrated by fitting sample passages of easy and difficult style.

But it is more than a book of rules for aspiring writers. Dr. Flesch offers his own objective device for determining how difficult any given sample of reading matter is in terms of the educational level of readers. His formula takes account of average sentence length, frequency of affixes, and frequency of personal references, and assigns a specific weight to each of these factors. The final score tells us where the reading sample falls on a scale running from "very easy" (comics) to "very difficult" (scientific articles).

The selection of the three factors is justified as follows: (1) Short sentences have been shown to be easier to understand than long ones. (2) The frequency of affixes is taken as an index of abstractness; the more abstract, the more difficult is the reading matter. (3) Frequent references to persons makes reading easier.

There is nothing new about sentence length or personal references as criteria of comprehension. Both were used by W. S. Gray and B. E. Leary (*What Makes a Book Readable*, 1935) and other investigators. However, measuring the degree of abstractness by the number of affixes seems to be Dr. Flesch's original contribution.

Somewhat puzzling to the uninitiated may be the fact that Dr. Flesch discusses many more factors of readability than are covered by his formula; for instance, *the use of repetition, filler words, ample punctuation,*

and verbs in the active voice, and *the avoidance of commenting adjectives, compound prepositions, unnecessary connectives, relative pronouns, and rhetorical devices.* If these factors are important in a readable style, as Dr. Flesch undoubtedly believes, why are they omitted from his formula? The selected factors probably showed a high correlation with the factors omitted. If so, his formula might be considered valid as a short-cut device for measuring readability. The danger is that naive popularizers, hoping to produce a readable style, may focus their attention on Dr. Flesch's three factors alone and discover that they brought forth none-too-readable passages. Used as an index, his formula does seem much handier to use than, for instance, Irving Lorge's readability index ("Predicting Readability." *Teachers College Record*, March 1944).

Any writer of textbooks or popular non-fiction will profit greatly from Dr. Flesch's words of advice. Students of reading and library science will be especially interested in his rejection of C. K. Ogden's *Basic English* and his arguments against the use of E. L. Thorndike's *The Teachers Word Book* as a means of determining readability. Previous investigators (for instance, Gray, Dale, and Lorge) considered vocabulary as an important index of difficulty. Flesch shows that a passage containing many rare words may still be easy to read.

Thirteen years ago, Edgar Dale and R. W. Tyler wrote: "There are no scientific techniques by means of which to make an accurate estimate of the reading difficulty of books and pamphlets on the library shelves" (*Library Quarterly*, July 1934). Dr. Flesch is one of several investigators claiming to provide the lacking techniques. It is now up to librarians and publishers to test and apply them, since reading is one of their basic problems.—Robert H. Muller.