Assessing the Readability of Label Text

One of the problems to be overcome in label development is assessing the readability of labels. One possible solution is to apply readability formulas to the text. Another solution is to obtain visitor input. These alternatives are discussed below.

Readability Formulas: Are They the Answer?

Carter, J. (1993). How old is this text? *Environmental Interpretation*. Pp. 10-11. Also in Durbin (1996).

This article describes how to use two readability tests — the Fry test and the Cloze procedure. Below are directions for computing readability.

Fry test:
(1) Select at random three passages of 100 words.
(2) Count the total number of sentences in each passage and take the average of these numbers.
(3) Count the total number of syllables in each passage and take the average.
(4) Plot these two averages on a graph that relates sentence length to number of syllables.

The Fry test only measures complexity of language. It can't tell you whether an audience actually understands the message.

Cloze procedure:
(1) Select a passage from text and prepare a version in which every fifth word is replaced by an equal size blank. Passage should start at the beginning of a paragraph. Leave the first and last sentences intact and don't remove proper nouns unless they have already occurred.
(2) Show this text to a sample of your audience, ask them to guess the missing words.
(3) Calculate the score as a percentage.
(4) Scores below 40 show real difficulty with text. Scores above 60% are good.

What's Wrong with Using Readability Formulas?

(1) Results vary from one formula to another. What do you do when the formulas conflict? Obviously, the formulas do not measure the same thing. So, what is readability?
(2) The formulas assume you have a large amount of text; however, good labels are short.
(3) Adhering to a formula may result in omitting important technical terms. Of course, unfamiliar terms should be defined.
(4) The text may end up readable, but boring.

Visitor Evaluation: The Alternative

Obtaining visitor input is a more valid way to determine readability. Here are several ways to assess the readability of labels using visitor input.

Front-end Evaluation

As most readers of *Visitor Behavior* know, front-end evaluation surveys potential visitors during the planning stage of an exhibition project. Evaluation during this stage attempts to assess the audience's preknowledge, misconcpetions, interests, preferences, and attitudes.

Formative Evaluation

Cued Testing. In cued testing, visitors are asked to read the label text to determine whether the message is accurately communicated and assess emotional characteristics of the message. One way to test labels is to randomly select visitors in the museum, ask them to read the text, and then ask questions to determine the effectiveness of the text. Another technique is to ask a group of individuals (e.g., a class of students) to read the text and complete a survey.

Uncued Testing. For uncued testing, visitors are unobtrusively observed reading the label. Uncued testing allows you to determine the attracting and holding power of the exhibit label.

Remedial Evaluation

Even after an exhibition is installed, visitor input can provide valuable information for fine-tuning the labels.

References on Types of Visitor Evaluation

Bitgood, S. (1994). Classification of exhibit evaluation: How deep should Occam's razor cut? *Visitor Behavior*, 9(3), 8-10.

Bitgood, S., & Loomis, R. (1993). Introduction to environmental design and evaluation in museums. *Environment and Behavior*, 25(6), 683-697.

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Miles, R. (1994). Let's hear it for Mr. Occam: A reply to Bitgood & Shettel on remedial evaluation. *Visitor Behavior*, 9(3), 4-7.

Screven, C. G. (1990). Uses of evaluation before, during, and after exhibit design. *ILVS Review*, 1(2), 36-66.