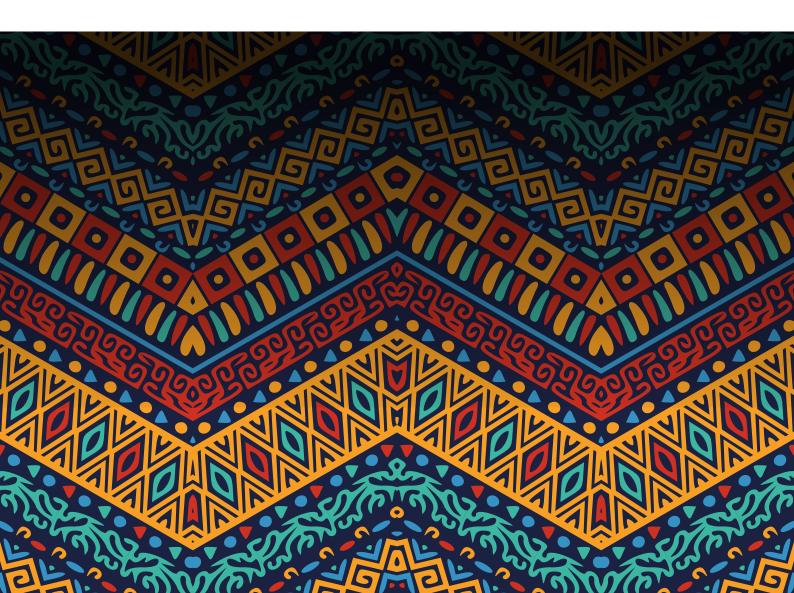The Education Academy

Decolonising DMU Toolkit

Readability

What is the issue/
problem this resource
will help to address?
Context setting

Most of us prefer to read written information that is concise and clear. We only need to think about how we deal with the terms and conditions when we use a service online. Long, difficult to read information often isn't read at all. For international students, or those with a disability that impacts access to text, this kind of text is even more difficult to access. This resource focuses on international students.

Many of us get frustrated at students not reading information in emails or the module handbook. This can lead to queries, phone calls and problems because students don't read or don't understand what we write. It can also lead to complaints. The 2020 and 2021 NSS comments highlighted that our students don't think we are timely, effective and sometimes honest in how we communicate. Improving readability will help to show students that we want to communicate effectively.

Being a student involves a lot of admin. This is more so if you need to deal with systems like visas, as international students do. It's also more difficult when you aren't used to the language of universities in the UK. Students can feel overwhelmed by emails or forms to complete. Often, their response is to disengage. They don't read the information, and then miss key deadlines. Or they rely on informal information from other students, which can be inaccurate. So our communication fails. The student doesn't get the information that we're trying to convey.

Readability is a way of measuring how difficult it is to read a piece of text. There are different methods of calculating readability. Factors like sentence length and complexity, word length and vocabulary are usually considered. When we understand what makes text easier to read we can make our emails and letters more accessible.

How should the resource be used and by whom?

This resource is aimed at anyone writing to students. It doesn't look at the readability of academic text. It looks at how to improve the readability of administrative text – emails & letters.

The resource

These factors make text more difficult to read for international students:

- Long sentences
- Sentences with lots of clauses (look out for lots of commas)
- Complex, multi-syllable words
- Idioms e.g. "raining cats and dogs"
- Words with more than one meaning e.g. "mean"
- Passive voice e.g. "a decision has been made" (passive voice) vs. "we have decided" (active voice)

There are lots of different ways of measuring readability:

The First Word site compares your text to academic and literary texts. It's helpful because you don't have to interpret scoring systems: https://thefirstword.co.uk/readabilitytest/ This resource is as easy as Barack Obama's speeches, for example.

In Microsoft Word you can work out the readability of your writing. The instructions for doing that can be found here: https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/get-your-document-s-readability-and-level-statistics-85b4969e-e80a-4777-8dd3-f7fc3c8b3fd2 This calculates the Flesch-Kincaid Grade and Reading Ease scores. You can find information about what those mean here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flesch%E2%80%93Kincaid_readability_tests

There are many other readability scoring systems. Often, they give a "reading age" for a text. Remember that:

- This is the reading age of the text, not the people reading.
- In the UK a reading age of 11 years for a text is usually considered plain English.
- Making text easier to read doesn't mean that you have to "dumb down" the content.

Additional considerations

Many disabilities have an impact on how easy it is for someone to access print e.g. visual impairments and learning differences like dyslexia. If you make sure your text is readable for international students, you will be improving the accessibility for everyone.

Case study/example

The Disability Advice & Support team did some training for their team about readability. This was in response to comments and complaints from some students about information being hard to access. The team then did a review of all pro-forma emails and revised them to make them easier to read.

Key lessons from this exercise were that it was better to give concise information with hyperlinks (to further detail) rather than try to give comprehensive information all at once. It was also useful to highlight any actions that students needed to take, using colour.

Feedback from students has been positive:

> *That's all so helpful and I'm really really grateful you highlighted what I need in yellow! Little things like that really make all the difference with clarity.*

Response rates to emails are also improved.

Additional resources

http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/ The Plain English campaign are a campaign group. They have lots of free, useful tools and information on their website.

Academic articles about readability and accessibility often focus on a specific context. Here are some examples from medicine and education:

Rughani, G., Hanlon, P. , Corcoran, N. and Mair, F. (2021) The readability of general practice websites: a cross-sectional analysis of all general practice websites in Scotland. British Journal of General Practice, 71(706), e391-e398. https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/227926/ This article looks at the accessibility of GP practice websites by measuring readability.

Karhu, M., Hilera, J. R., Fernández, L., & Ríos, R. (2012). Accessibility and readability of university websites in Finland. Journal of Accessibility and Design for All, 2(2), 178-189. https://doi.org/10.17411/jacces.v2i2.70 This article looks at the accessibility of university websites. Most of the article looks at accessibility for disabled people but one section looks at measures of readability.

Patil, S., Yacoub, J.H., Geng, X. et al. Radiology Reporting in the Era of Patient-Centered Care: How Can We Improve Readability?. J Digit Imaging 34, 367–373 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10278-021-00439-0 This article examines a project to improve the readability level of medical reports to improve their accessibility to patients.

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