

THE BASICS

Should you write for a specific reading level?

Church newsletters are read by people of varying reading abilities. So, is there a single age level toward which you should target your writing?

Some say there is. Several popular magazines aim for about an eighth-grade reading level, and many consider that to be the standard for church newsletters as well. Weekly news magazines and newspapers, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, that assume a more learned readership may aim a little higher, but most readers prefer that material be written simply. Furthermore, even the most sophisticated readers are not offended by content that is easy to read.

The reading level of an article is partially determined by how many words of three syllables or more you use, as well as the average number of words in your sentences. The grammar feature in most word-processing programs can be set to give you an age-level readability score based on these countable features. (See your program's Help menu to find out if it has this feature.)

Those reading-level scores can be misleading, however. That's because readability has more to do with 1) the

logical flow of an article, 2) the transitions between points, 3) the word choices and 4) the reader's inherent interest in the subject being discussed. You are likely to confuse readers by printing badly organized articles even if they are composed of small words and short sentences.

Rather than relying on readability scores, try this: Every so often, take an article you have written and ask one of your readers — someone representing an average member of your audience — to read it. Then ask her if anything you wrote confused her. If she identifies any sticking point, consider how you could reword it to clear up the misunderstanding. After you have done that with a few articles, chances are you'll start to write in a way that communicates better, and you won't have to worry about the reading-level of the material in your newsletter.

By the way, according to the age-level score in our word-processor, the reading grade-level of this article is 11.5. But because we worked hard on its organization, we are guessing that you had no trouble understanding it. **N**

ART-TIP

Create backgrounds for articles

A gray or lightly colored graphic placed behind the text of an article adds interest to newsletter pages and flyers. Creating a "screened-back" image is easy with most word-processing programs. Select an image, place it on your page, and enlarge as needed (WMF files enlarge best). Use your program's brightness and contrast settings to lighten the picture. Type your text across the image. You may need to experiment so that the text is readable and the image is visible. See your program's Help menu for specific information about contrast and brightness. This technique can also be used to give the appearance of a watermark on stationery. **N**



From a church worship bulletin in Canton, Ohio:

PREPARATION FOR WORSHIP

CONFESSION OF SIN (To be read responsibly)

O Lord, we have sinned in things we have done

Was the congregation *responsive*?