



## **OKDHS Style Guide**

**Version 06-2006**

**Section 2.4**

**Readability**

# OKDHS Style Guide

---

## Table of Contents

<b><i>Readability</i></b> .....	<b><i>ii</i></b>
<b>Readability by State</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Elements of Readability</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Checking the Readability Level of Content</b> .....	<b>2</b>

## Readability

Literacy is the ability to read and understand written information. According to national statistics, about half of the American population reads at the eighth grade level or lower. A number of writers have evaluated text from health warning labels to government documents to see if they are written at a level that can be understood by citizens. Unfortunately, too many government documents and information sources are written at too high of a level for citizens to comprehend.

A Brown University study tested government Web sites to determine grade-level readability of the home page of many state and federal government Web sites. The procedure employed the Flesch-Kincaid standard to judge each site's readability level. The Flesch-Kincaid test is a standard reading tool evaluator and is even packaged with Microsoft Word. It is computed by dividing the average sentence length (number of words divided by number of sentences) by the average number of syllables per word (number of syllables divided by the number of words).

The Brown study showed that 89 percent of government Web sites are not easily understood by the citizenry because the sites read at higher than an eighth grade level. Fully two-thirds of all sites have language consistent with a 12th grade reading level, which is much higher than that of the average American.

Most importantly, the study showed the following:

- There is little correlation between agency type and readability level.
- Agencies that served people who were generally less educated often had a higher grade-level readability than those whose content might attract more highly educated users.

The message? More attention needs to be paid to readability as a barrier for site guests of the OKDHS Web site. Much like accessibility, readability should be considered a vital part of Web site usability and not an add-on.

Also, the study noted differences between state and federal sites:

- Sixty-eight percent of state sites read at the 12th grade level compared to 63 percent of the federal sites
- For government sites as a whole:
- Sixty-nine percent of executive branch sites are written at the 12th grade level
- Sixty-five percent of legislative sites are written at the 12th grade level
- Sixty percent of judicial sites are written at the 12th grade level
- Fifty-six percent of portal sites are written at the 12th grade level

Agency type matters much more, although not always in a manner consistent with the particular audience served by the Web site. One might expect that an agency serving more educated clients or customers would gear its Web site to a higher level than another agency serving more poorly educated people.

## OKDHS Style Guide

---

However, as shown below, agencies potentially geared toward the less educated do not have lower grade-level readability levels. For example, corrections departments report the highest percentage (83 percent) of Web sites written at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade level. The following chart shows the percentage of government agency types that read at a 12<sup>th</sup> grade level.

Elem. Ed.	Hum. Serv.	Health	Housing	Corrections	Budget	Tax	Eco. Dev.
74%	67%	69%	69%	83%	81%	46%	79%

# OKDHS Style Guide

---

## ***Readability by State***

Readability levels vary significantly across individual states and the federal government. The state whose sites are geared to the highest-grade level (meaning the least usable in terms of average readability) is Utah with a mean grade level of 11.7 across its government Web sites. It is followed by Mississippi (11.5), Texas (11.5), Virginia (11.5), Minnesota (11.4) and Arkansas (11.4). Government sites in Oklahoma scored a composite of 10.8; OKDHS read at a 12<sup>th</sup> grade level. The state with Web sites geared to the lowest grade level in terms of readability is Rhode Island, which has a composite of a 10.1 grade level.

Based on this survey, the content of the OKDHS Web site is above the average readability level for most Americans, and also above the OKDHS Web standard of a ninth grade level. Those who provide written Web content that does not reflect an understanding of Internet readability research are losing an opportunity to communicate to the public often and clearly.

The Brown study, and other similar studies, demonstrates that the Internet poses very particular challenges and opportunities with respect to how information is actually read.

## ***Elements of Readability***

Many of the elements, such as font choices (both in size and actual font), that can have an impact on readability have been made for you in the MCMS templates. These templates ensure the OKDHS Web site has continuity and meets certain OKDHS and regulatory standards.

Continuity is one of the most important considerations in the readability and actual use of the Web site by site guests. For instance, research shows that fonts using serifs increase the ease and speed of reading in printed documents. However, the same research has demonstrated that fonts without serifs outperform fonts with serifs in terms of readability of information on a Web site.

Color choices, column widths, page organization and other features have all been incorporated in the design of the MCMS templates as the new research regarding Web readability was made available.

There are other considerations particular to writing the Web content. Of course, all potentially visible grammatical and spelling errors *must* be avoided. In the “Writing for the Web” portion of this style guide, you will find information about understanding the scanning habits of Internet users, how to write your Web content so that it will be appealing for site guests and other tips on how to make your content more usable by site guests.

Although achieving an understanding of content readability requires time and research, it is necessary for those who want to maximize Web content's value to OKDHS Web site guests. Even good writers need to acquaint themselves with new research and studies regarding readability.

# OKDHS Style Guide

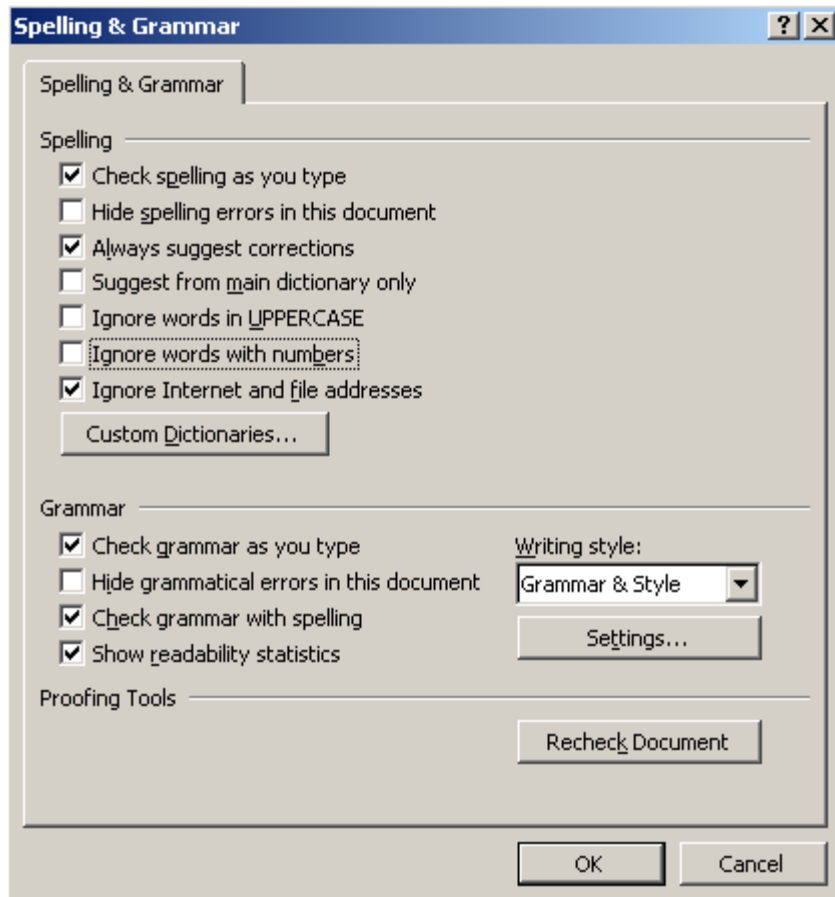
---

## ***Checking the Readability Level of Content***

To check the readability level of your Web content, you can use Microsoft Word. Below is a step-by-step guide for activating the readability check and how to determine the final grade level.

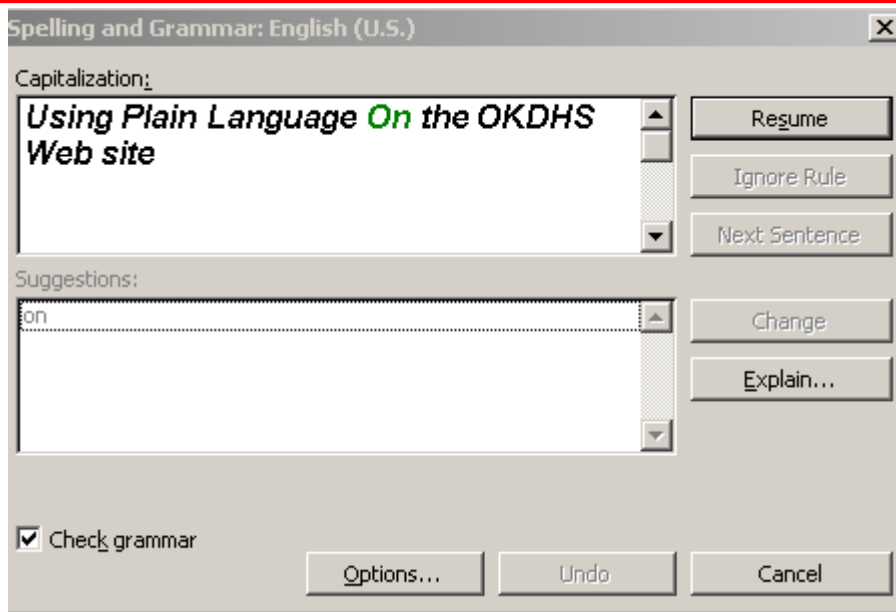
In Word, go to Tools in the file menu and select Options

1. Choose on the Spelling and Grammar tab
2. To activate the readability statistics, check the box at the bottom that reads Show readability statistics. After checking that option, click the OK button.

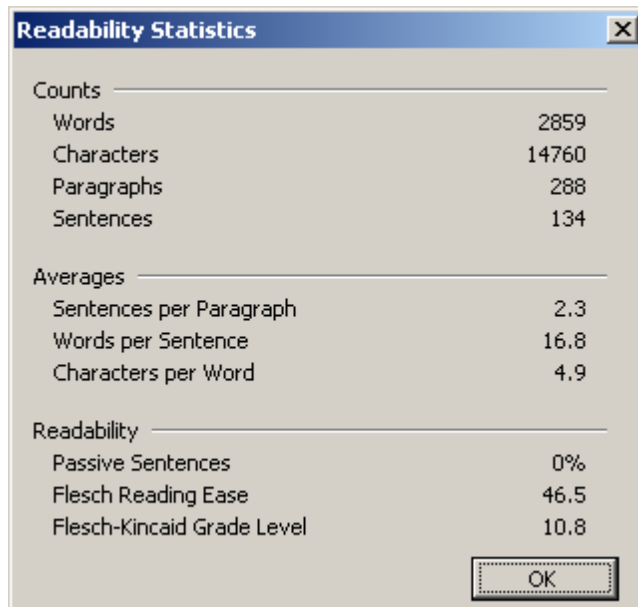


3. Next, go to Tools in the menu options and select Spelling and Grammar
4. When the Spelling and Grammar pop-up opens, click on the Options button at the bottom

# OKDHS Style Guide



5. Check the box located next to Show Readability Statistics and click on OK
6. After clicking OK, the spelling and grammar checks will take place. Once they are complete, the following box will appear:



7. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level is found at the very bottom of the pop-up window

Citizens  
Citizens – Baby Boomers  
Citizens – Developmental Disabled  
Citizens – Drug Users  
Citizens – Native American Tribes  
Citizens – Non-English Speakers  
Citizens – Older Oklahomans/Seniors  
Citizens – Parents

# OKDHS Style Guide

---

Business – Certified Public Accountants  
Business – Child Care Centers  
Business - Employers  
Business – Financial Institutions  
Business – Home Child Care Facilities  
Business – Information Technology  
Business – Substance Abuse Professionals  
Education  
Education – Early Childhood Educators  
Education - Educators  
Education - Colleges  
Education – Students  
Elected officials  
Faith – Based  
Faith-Based – Groups  
Faith-Based – Churches  
Government  
Government – Area Agencies on Aging  
Government – Call Centers  
Government – Federal  
Government – Federal Courts and Judges  
Government – Human Services Agencies  
Government – Law Enforcement  
Government - Libraries  
Government - Local  
Government - State  
Government – State Courts and Judges  
Groups - Advocacy  
Groups - Caregivers  
Groups – Child Care  
Groups – Professional  
Home/Facilities  
Home/Facilities – Adult Day Centers  
Home/Facilities – Nursing Home  
Home/Facilities – Senior Centers  
Legal  
Legal – Attorneys/Lawyers  
Media  
Medical  
Medical – Hospitals  
Non-Profits  
OKDHS  
OKDHS – Customers and Clients  
OKDHS – Oklahoma Commission for Human Services  
OKDHS – Parents and Groups  
OKDHS – Staff  
OKDHS – Vendors/Contractors  
Other  
Programs and Services

# OKDHS Style Guide

---

Researchers