USING THE MICROSOFT SPELLING & GRAMMAR OPTIONS TOOL

1. Using Microsoft Word, click the Microsoft Office Button, and then click Word Options.

2. Click Proofing. Make sure Check grammar with spelling is selected. Under When correcting grammar in Word, select the Show readability statistics check box.

3. When you run "Spell & Grammar Check" on a document, a Window pops up at the end and shows “Readability Statistics”.

4. Jump to the three statistics at the bottom of the Window:

A. The score for "Passive Sentences" is expressed as a percentage from 0%-100%. Get as close to 0% as possible. Passive sentences do not involve or engage your reader. A passive sentence is when the subject is acted upon. Active voice (the opposite of passive voice) is when the subject does the action. So passive voice is "The letter was mailed yesterday." Active voice is "Rob mailed the letter yesterday." Active voice is clearer: Who mailed the letter? Rob mailed the letter. It's more engaging. The only time you want to use passive voice is when you want to be tactful: Instead of "Rob lost the report we all need" you would use passive voice: "The report we all need was lost."

B. The score for "Flesch Reading Ease" is a percentage between 0% and 100%. It suggests what percentage of the average population who read this document will understand it. Strive for a score between 60 and 70.

C. The score for “Flesch Kincaid Grade Level” is the document’s grade level stated as a decimal. Remember: Since this uses a mathematical formula to evaluate the written word, there is an inherent flaw. Still it’s a valuable tool; more valuable the longer the document. 6.2 means first semester of the sixth grade level. 9.6 is the second semester of the ninth grade year. 13.4 is the first semester of the freshman year of college and so on. Strive to write all your documents at an 8th grade level or less! Nathanial Hawthorne said it best: "Easy reading is damn hard writing." USA Today strives to write at a 6th grade level. Readers Digest is a 5th grade level. Time and Newsweek strive for 10th grade. US News & World Report strives for 12th grade level.

-more-

© Robert T. Pocock
Do not view this as the dumbing down of America. Rather, business communications (not fiction, prose or writing for pleasure) but business communications must be easy to read. Even if you have your PhD from MIT, you want business communications that are easy to understand. At my employer, Priority Health, we are required to write all member communications at 8th grade level or lower. The government requires all communications to Medicaid members be written at 6th grade or lower. In most business communications, you should strive for a score below 8.0.

8. Here how to increase the reading ease and lower the grade level:

A. Remember: a mathematical formula determines grade level. Use the middle part of the “Readability Statistics” Window which reports "Averages". You will lower the grade level by lowering those averages.

B. "Sentences per Paragraph" is self-explanatory. Long, drawn out paragraphs, are harder to read. Add a few "returns" to create shorter paragraphs.

C. "Words per Sentence" should be twelve words or less. Break complex sentences apart by adding a few periods.

D. "Characters per Word" should be five or less. Don't use a two or three syllable words when a one syllable word will do. At Priority Health we no longer write "you have been approved for a tonsillectomy" but rather write, "your doctor may remove your tonsils." Isn’t that second sentence easier to read?

9. Practice using this Tool. If you achieve a Grade Level below 8.0, you are well on your way to writing clear, concise communications. As you improve your writing skills, so will you improve your oral presentation skills.

-end-