

Writing in Plain Language

Recent data from the Department of Education shows that the average American reads at an 8th grade level. People with disabilities may read at an even lower grade level if their disability affects their reading and understanding skill levels. Protection and Advocacy agencies (P&A's) and Client Assistance Programs (CAP) should use plain language to target this population when creating outreach materials such as pamphlets, newsletters, and website material. The CESA Committee believes that this will make sure that the materials are understood by the widest audience possible. Here are a few helpful tips to use when writing in plain language.

1. **Include a glossary to define difficult terms.** A glossary appears at the end of written information and includes terms that are either newly-introduced or uncommon. For example, most individuals are not familiar with legal terms. So the following sentence may be misunderstood: "Disability Rights Montana filed an amicus brief in support of the Indiana P&A's position." Include a glossary that defines amicus brief. The entry may read: *amicus brief*- someone, not part of a case, who gives information about the case to help the court make a decision.
2. **Use a thesaurus.** A thesaurus is a book that contains synonyms (same or similar meaning) and sometimes antonyms (opposite meaning) of words. It can assist you in finding simpler ways to express the same idea.

Example 1:

Robert utilizes a wheelchair. (Reading grade level - 12.5)

Robert uses a wheelchair. (Reading grade level - 6.6)

Example 2:

We have challenged that State's assumptions that no evidence exists.
(Reading grade level - 8.3)

The State believes there is no evidence. We do not agree and are questioning their belief. (Reading grade level - 4.4)

3. **Let others read your written information before you publish it.** This really helps if the person reading the information is from the same population as the written information's intended audience. For example, written information for an elementary school should be read by children who are at an elementary school level. It may also be helpful to read the information out loud. Parts of the information that are hard to understand may be easier to find.
4. **Include definitions of words that may be hard to understand.** This can be done through the use of footnotes. A footnote is a note placed at the bottom of a page that talks about or gives a reference for a specific part of the information.¹ (See bottom of page for example.) The use of footnotes can greatly improve the reader's understanding of your written information. Also, footnotes are an excellent way to inform your reader of the meaning of difficult words within your written information. When using footnotes, it may help to use the word or phrase in **bold** so it is easier for the reader to return to the same place.

In some cases, it may confuse the reader to look to the bottom of the page for a definition of a word. Instead you can use the word in the sentence followed by the definition in parentheses. Example: A **coalition** (a group of people working together with a common interest) of disability advocates is working together on this problem.

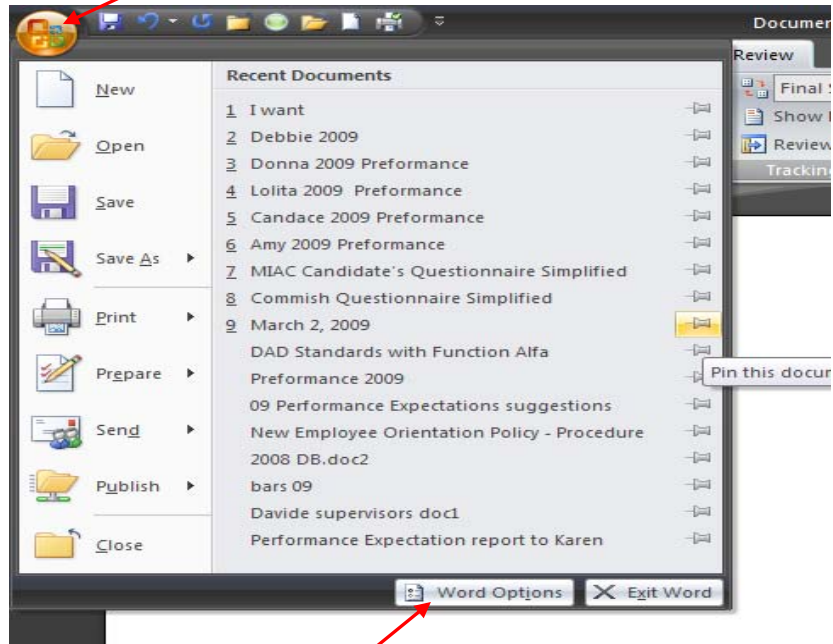
5. **Check the reading grade level of written information** using Microsoft Word and WordPerfect. To do this, please see instructions on the following pages:

¹ This is an example of a footnote.

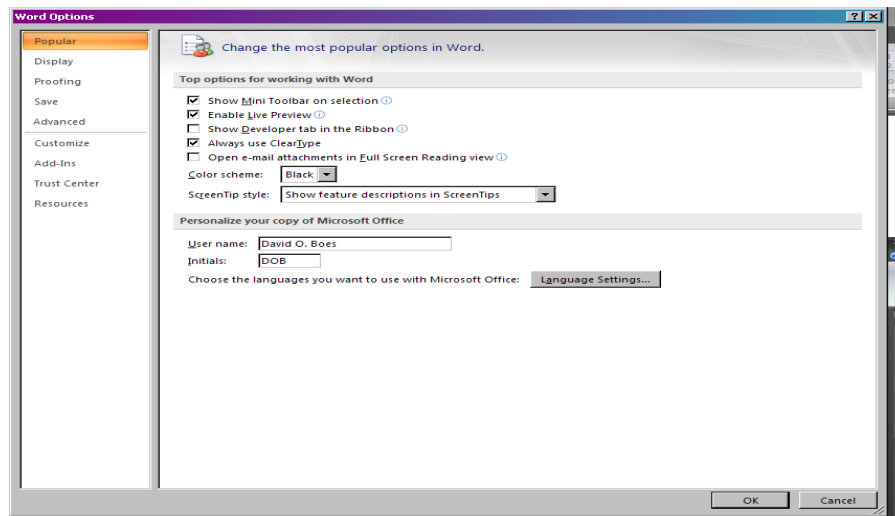
To check reading grade level using Microsoft Word 2007

1) Open Word program.

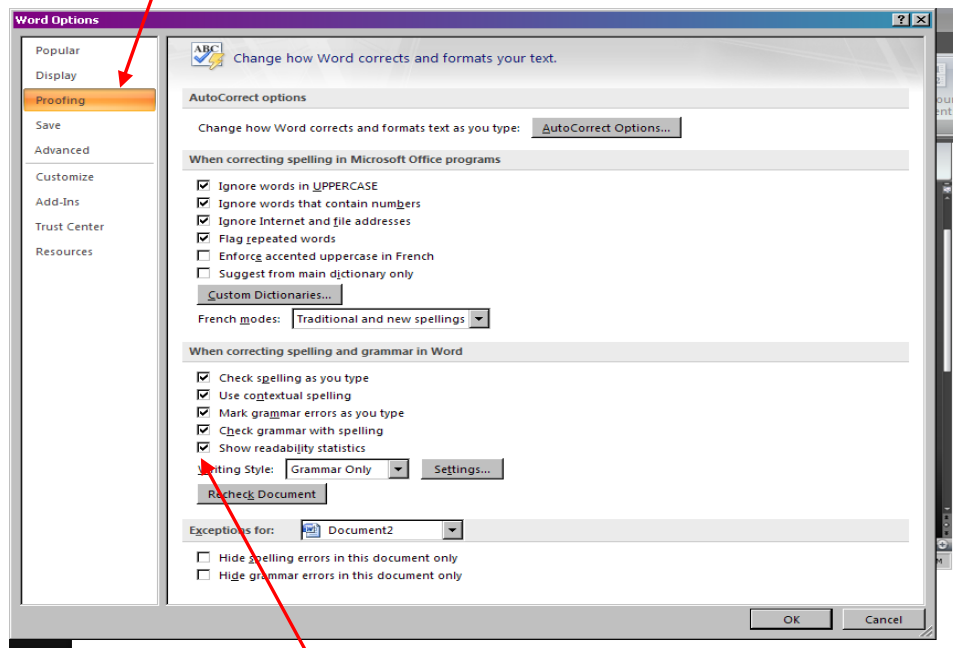
2) Left click upper left Icon.  A new box opens.



3) Left click **Word Options** in lower right corner. A new box opens.



4) Left click **Proofing** in left column. A new box opens.



5) Make sure that **Show readability statistics** is checked (this will be a permanent change).

6) Left click **OK** until you are back to the Word document.

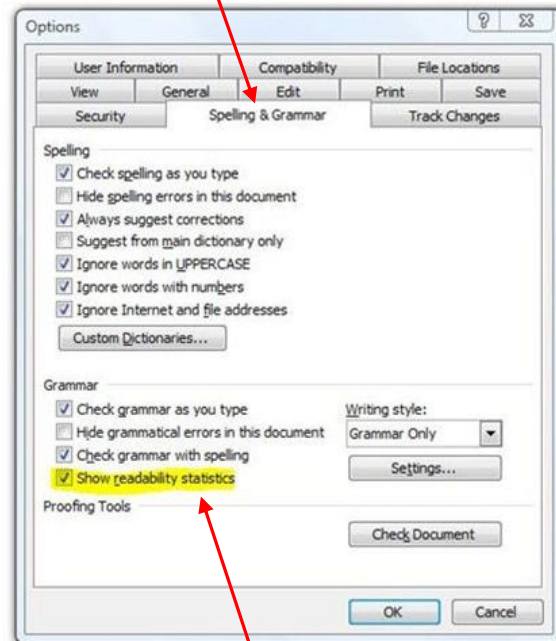
7) After spell checking the document, readability statistics (reading grade level) will display.

To check reading grade level using Microsoft Word 2003

1) Open Word program.

2) Click on the **Tools** drop-down menu and select **Options**.

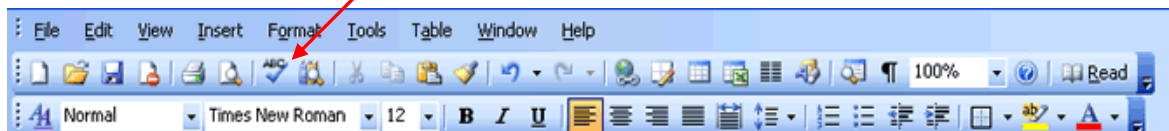
3) Click on the **Spelling & Grammar** Tab.



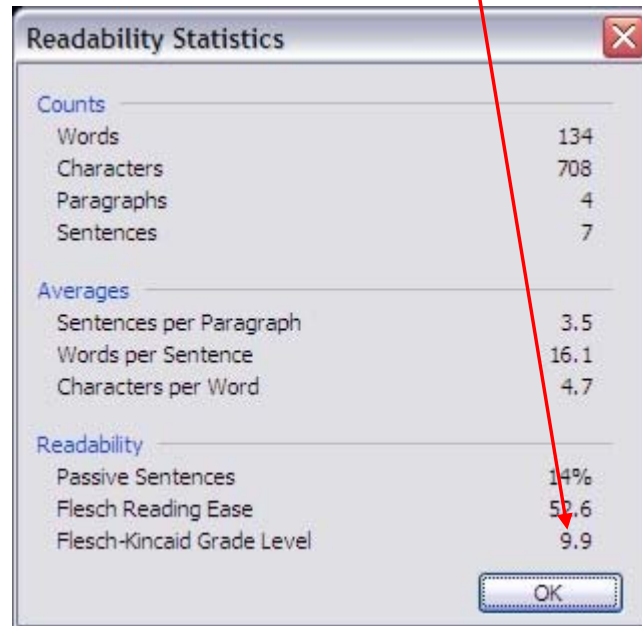
4) Make sure that **Show readability statistics** is checked (this will be a permanent change).

5) Left click **OK** to close the box and return to your document.

6) On the Toolbar, click  for **Grammar check**.

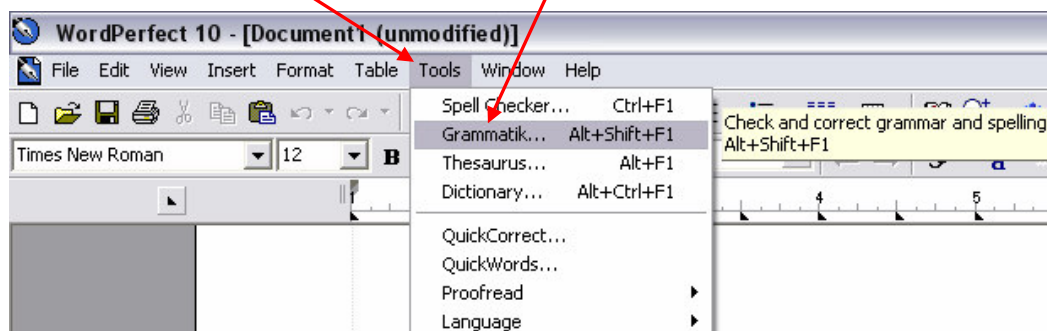


- 7) When Microsoft Word finishes checking grammar, a box appears that shows information about the reading **Grade Level** of the document.



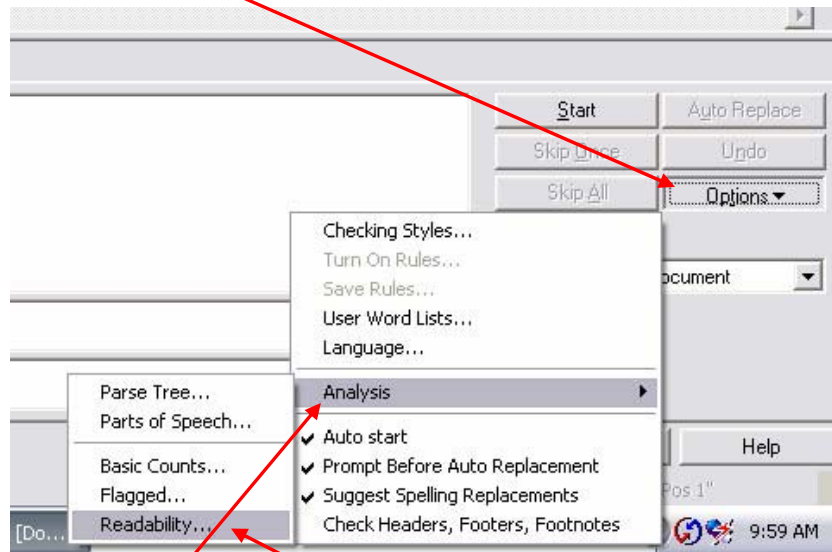
To use WordPerfect Readability Tool

- 1) Left click **Tools**, then left click **Grammatik** (grammar check) in drop-down box.



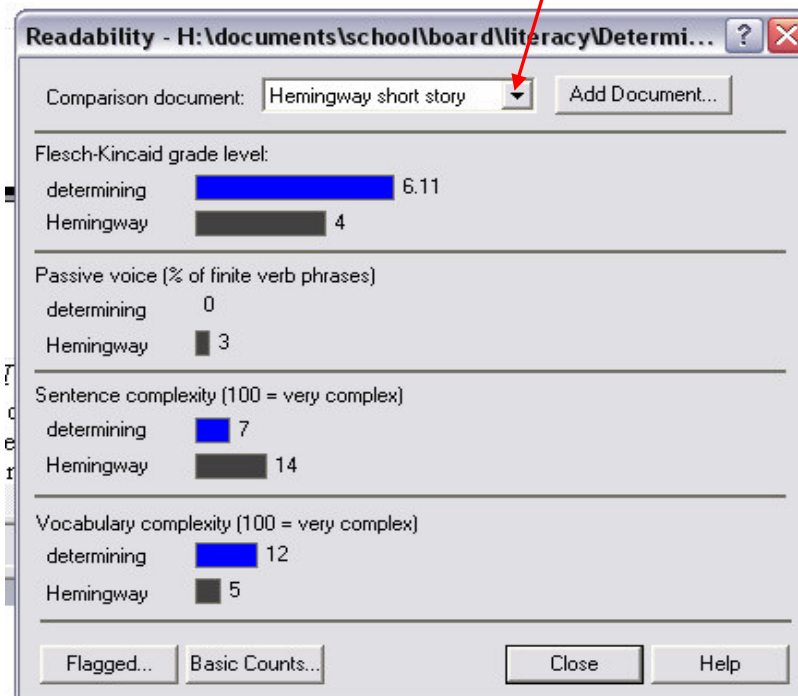
- 2) A new box opens saying **Grammar check completed. Close Grammatik?** Left click **No**.

3) Left click **Options** in right column.



4) Go to **Analysis**. Left click **Readability** in drop-down box.

5) In the Readability box, choose a **Comparison Document** from the comparison document list box. Readability statistics will display.



6. When providing written information, it is also important to take into consideration its accessibility including:

- ✓ Font size and type (may vary depending on target audience)
- ✓ Line spacing
- ✓ Graphics and illustrations to describe text
- ✓ Alternative formats
- ✓ Cultural factors ...images, colors, words, phrases relevant to the audience

For more information on accessibility see:

Removing Barriers: Tips and Strategies to Promote Accessible Communication

www.fpg.unc.edu/%7Encodh/pdfs/rbtipsandstrategies.pdf

7. Additional resources to learn more about using plain language include:

How to Create and Assess Print Materials

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/materials.html>

Federal Plain Language Guidelines

<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/index.cfm>

Plain Language Association International

<http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org>

Vendors who will translate Publications into Plain English

Transcend

Contact: Cindy Sun

(530) 756-3834

cindy@transcend.net

Communicaid Inc

Contact: Victoria Reeder-Haik

(408) 350-3515

vreeder@communicaidinc.com

How to Create a Useful Fact Sheet for Individuals with Disabilities

<http://www.ndrn.org/TASC/manage/IR/factsheet.pdf>