

SCIENCE & INDUSTRY

# kosmetikos\*

## The Index of Gunning

A quick lesson in utilizing your pen as a sword.

By Steve Herman

*Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.<sup>1</sup>*

—William Strunk, Jr.

**K**osmetikos is always two pages long. Such writing is not literature, but a craft. There is nothing shameful about writing as a craft: it requires discipline, it can be learned, and it has value for all who set words to paper—in other words, everyone. Professional, technical, managerial workers spend 23 percent of their time writing.<sup>2</sup>

A goal of good nonfiction writing is concision and clarity. Politicians would much prefer to not be precisely understood. The Watergate era inaugurated the Golden Age of Obscure English. Noted Elliot Richardson:<sup>3</sup>

*“And yet, on balance, affirmative action has, I think, been a qualified success.”*

With such lucid expression, Richardson held four major cabinet posts in the 1970s!

Good nonfiction writing must be readable, but how can that be determined? Readers of *Global Cosmetic Industry* expect numbers, formulas, facts. Fortunately, there are several methods to quantify the clarity and reading level of prose. A number cannot define literary genius,

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\*Greek kosmEtikos, skilled in adornment or decorating.

but numbers certainly can determine the grade level of a text. In 1944, Robert Gunning made one of the first, and still well-known, indicators with his Fog Index. The index correlates certain quantifiable aspects of a text with its grade level. Most people are comfortable reading two grades below their highest attained grade.

Assuming the average *GCI* reader has an undergraduate degree, it would be appropriate to aim at a Fog Index of 14. Figure 1 shows the calculation of the Index of the April *Kosmetikos* column.

### FIGURE 1 The Gunning Index

The longer a sentence is, the more difficult it is to hold in short-term memory: A sentence becomes a struggle after 21 words. Of the 1,000 most frequently used words, only 36 are more than two syllables. Thus, short words and short sentences are easier to understand.

Gunning's Fog Index accounts for this with a formula correlated to grade level. In a representative passage of about 100 words, divide the number of words by the number of sentences to get the average sentence length. Count the number of words with three or more syllables (difficult words) and divide by the total number of words to get the percentage of long words.

$$\text{Gunning Fog Index} = (\text{sentence length} + \% \text{difficult words}) \times 0.4$$

The April *Kosmetikos* column had 790 words in 45 sentences with 115 difficult words:

$$\text{Fog Index} = (790/45 + 115/790) \times 0.4 = 13$$

The column had a reading level of a person who completed one year of college.

**FIGURE 2** Readability Statistics for this Column

COUNTS	
Words	787
Characters	4,085
Paragraphs	13
Sentences	52
AVERAGES	
Sentences Per Paragraph	4.7
Words Per Sentence	8.1
Characters Per Word	4.9
READABILITY	
Passive Sentences	1%
Flesch Reading Ease	59.5
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	7.2

The patron saint of clear writing is William Strunk, Jr. (1869-1946). His "Elements of Style" was privately printed in 1918 (the full- and free-text of the original edition is available from Reference 4). E.B. White has made several revisions, resulting in the canonical "Strunk & White."

Strunk & White, a tiny volume to begin with, can be summarized as: write logically, make the paragraph a unit of thought, write clear and concise sentences, use short words, eliminate useless words. This does not imply simplistic writing, but making every word pull its weight in the text.

The "Elements of Style" is required reading for all writers. "I'm not a writer!" you still insist. No reports, no letters, no memos, no presentations? Consider the work allocation of that ultimate icon of non-literate geek, the computer professional: 30 percent speaking, 17 percent reading, 23 percent writing.<sup>2</sup> It is certain that the cosmetic industry professional encounters at least as many words in a day, and clear communication is certainly an increasingly valued job skill.

Computers have revolutionized writing. Bad spelling can be virtually wiped out by Spell Check (in MS Office hit Tools/Spelling & Grammar). To enable statistics, go to Tools/Options/Spelling & Grammar and check off Show readability statistics. In Settings, check off Passive sentences, and in Style select Clichés, Jargon, Unclear phrasing, and Wordiness. The Readability Statistics for this month's column are shown in Figure 2.

When finished writing in MS Word, hit ABC on the toolbar. A box will appear headed "Readability Statistics" along with word and paragraph analysis, readability statistics using the Flesch Reading Ease Score (ranges from 0-100, aim for 60-70), and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score (aim for 7-8).

Presentation software has revolutionized the appearance of technical meetings and sales calls. An \$8,000 LCD projector and \$2,000 laptop has replaced the white board with erasable ink marker. The result is everyone can make presentations that would have required a graphic design department 10 years ago. Still, some presentations have more impact than others do. A font size of 20 should be readable from the back of the room. There is a rule of seven: seven words per line, seven lines per screen.

A number of stock templates are available with all presentation software, but eye-catching results can be achieved easily by using pictures as backgrounds. A scanned image or graphic found on the Internet (usually a jpg or bmp file) can be used. Open a blank presentation and a blank slide, insert picture from file, size to fit the slide, and then insert text or other content over the picture.

Once the slides look good, the presentation can flow. Slide Show/Slide Transition will offer various ways of going from one slide to the next. Slide Show/Custom Animation allows different parts of the individual slide to enter in a predetermined order with options for how each appears. Sound is also an option at each step of the process.

Knowledge has always been power. Increasingly, the ability to clearly communicate knowledge has become essential. Computers have made it physically easy for everyone to write. Technical and sales presentations have acquired bells and whistles with each software upgrade. Whatever your role in the cosmetic industry, a few minutes of focus on basic writing skills will surely repay the effort. ■

#### References

1. Strunk, William and White, E.B., *The Elements of Style*, 3rd Edition, Allyn and Bacon, 1979.
2. [www.sheridanc.on.ca/~randy/rap.dir/Topical.html](http://www.sheridanc.on.ca/~randy/rap.dir/Topical.html)
3. Zinsser, William, *On Writing Well*, 6th Edition, HarperPerennial, 1998.
4. [www.bartleby.com/people/Strunk-W.html](http://www.bartleby.com/people/Strunk-W.html)