

WHERE'S THE LET'S HAVE LUNCH KEY?

SPY Test-Drives Computer Editing Software



The advertising business is fond of grouping magazines demographically—that is, according to how rich or poor or acquisitive or educated a given magazine's average reader is. (By way of illustration, the average *Vanity Fair* reader might own a really cool stereo and have a median household income of, say, \$14,000, plus tips.) But while demographic studies can reckon what kind of vacation a reader takes and what sort of beer he drinks, they don't indicate the reader's, um, reading level.

But now, thanks to computer technology, there exists a tool to calibrate the complexity and sophistication of any writer's work. It's a piece of software called RightWriter, and its creators intend that it be used for editing. One of the ways it edits is to helpfully spew out a number—the "Readability Index"—that fixes the number of years of education a reader will need to understand a particular piece of writing. A Readability Index of 8.2, for example, says that you are writing for an eighth-grade reader. RightWriter also calculates a Strength Index ("a measure of the strength of the writing style"), a Descriptive Index ("a measure of

the use of adjectives and adverbs"), a Jargon Index ("a Jargon Index of greater than 0.5 indicates jargon is being used too heavily"), sentence-structure recommendations and a list of words to review ("words... that may be negative, jargon, colloquial [slang], misused, misspelled or frequently not understood").

We selected a wide variety of writing samples and fed them into the RightWriter program. While we're not at all sure we're ready to throw away our blue pencils, RightWriter did make us think long and hard about all those "negative words" we've been using. And it made us see our colleagues in magazine and book publishing through new eyes: specifically, we've stopped reading the stories of Raymond Carver (who wrote, we now know, for first graders), infinitely preferring our new subscriptions to *Juggs* and *Wrestling Fury* (suitable for a more sophisticated, ninth-grade audience).

What follows is RightWriter's ranking of 29 published writers according to their academic standing.

— Brian Beatty, with Seth Roberts and Joe Mastrianni

| | Grade (1-14) | Jargon Index (0-1) | Suggestions for Improvement | | Grade (1-14) | Jargon Index (0-1) | Suggestions for Improvement | | Grade (1-14) | Jargon Index (0-1) | Suggestions for Improvement |
|--|-----------------|--------------------------|---|---|-----------------|--------------------------|--|---|-----------------|--------------------------|--|
| Title <i>The Viewfinder</i> Author Raymond Carver Publ. Knopf Date 1981 | 1.53 | 0.00 | Use more prepositional phrases. | Title Liz Smith Author Liz Smith Publ. <i>Daily News</i> Date February 1989 | 8.24 | 0.00 | Use fewer clichés. | Title The Current Cinema: "Stunt" Author Pauline Kael Publ. <i>The New Yorker</i> Date February 1989 | 10.31 | 0.27 | Use less slang and more common words. |
| Title Ann Landers Author Ann Landers Publ. <i>New York Newsday</i> Date February 1989 | 5.34 | 0.00 | Review the use of exclamation points. | Title TRB: "Late Returns" Author Hendrik Hertzberg Publ. <i>The New Republic</i> Date April 1989 | 8.65 | 0.00 | | Title On My Mind: "Something Is Happening" Author A. M. Rosenthal Publ. <i>The New York Times</i> Date March 1989 | 10.33 | 0.00 | Use the active voice and shorter, simpler sentences. |
| Title <i>Bonfire of the Vanities</i> Author Tom Wolfe Publ. Farrar Straus & Giroux Date 1987 | 5.71 | 0.00 | | Title Screw You: "Fear of Frequent Flying" Author Al Goldstein Publ. <i>Screw</i> Date February 1989 | 8.91 | 0.78 | Use more positive wording. | Title TRB: "Fear of Flying" Author Michael Kinsley Publ. <i>The New Republic</i> Date September 1988 | 11.08 | 0.00 | |
| Title Dear Abby Author Abigail Van Buren Publ. <i>New York Newsday</i> Date February 1989 | 5.72 | 0.00 | Use less slang and more positive wording. | Title "Doctor: Cocaine kills pain" Author Hugh Wright Publ. <i>USA Today</i> Date February 1989 | 9.24 | 0.00 | | Title "Paraguay's Republic of Fear" (editorial) Author <i>The New York Times</i> Date February 1989 | 11.22 | 0.59 | Use more positive wording. |
| Title Song: "Basia" Author Andrew Abrahams Publ. <i>People</i> Date January 1989 | 6.67 | 0.00 | | Title La Dolce Musto Author Michael Musto Publ. <i>The Village Voice</i> Date February 1989 | 9.33 | 0.26 | Use fewer weak phrases and less ambiguous wording. | Title Suzy Author Aileen Mehle Publ. <i>New York Post</i> Date January 1989 | 12.18 | 0.23 | |
| Title Media Person Author Lewis Grossberger Publ. <i>7 Days</i> Date February 1989 | 7.01 | 0.30 | Use less wordy phrases, more common words and less slang. | Title "The Girls of Dairyland" Author Justin West Publ. <i>Juggs</i> Date February 1989 | 9.38 | 0.00 | | Title "The Rights of Gorbachev" Author I. F. Stone Publ. <i>The New York Review of Books</i> Date February 1989 | 12.27 | 0.23 | |
| Title "A Pair of Aces: all about two varmint hunting superstars..." Author J. D. Jones (handgun editor) Publ. <i>Guns & Hunting</i> Date January 1989 | 7.03 | 0.00 | | Title Miss Manners Author Judith Martin Publ. <i>Daily News</i> Date February 1989 | 9.52 | 0.32 | | Title "Cineplex and Loews in Clash of Titans..." Author Jim Robbins Publ. <i>Variety</i> Date January 1989 | 13.24 | 0.36 | |
| Title Beat Author Glenn O'Brien Publ. <i>Interview</i> Date February 1989 | 7.08 | 0.00 | | Title Social Studies Author James Revson Publ. <i>New York Newsday</i> Date February 1989 | 9.56 | 0.00 | | Title "Where's the LET'S HAVE LUNCH KEY?" Author Brian Beatty et al. Publ. SPY Date September 1989 | 13.75 | 0.00 | |
| Title "Who Pays for What?" Author unknown Publ. <i>Modern Bride</i> Date February 1989 | 7.68 | 0.00 | | Title "Terry Taylor: Championship Bound" Author Dan Laible Publ. <i>Wrestling Fury</i> Date April 1989 | 9.59 | 0.00 | | Title Brief Encounters: "Retrospective" Author Vince Lettli Publ. <i>Voice Literary Supplement</i> Date March 1989 | 14.90 | 0.61 | |
| Title (Letter to SPY) Author Gore Vidal Publ. SPY Date March 1989 | 7.81 | 0.48 | Try to use more simple sentences. | Title Editor's Letter: "Man in Motion" Author Tina Brown Publ. <i>Vanity Fair</i> Date February 1989 | 9.69 | 0.80 | "The writing contains a good deal of jargon." | | | | |