

How do I improve my consent's “readability”, or lower its “reading level”?

One of the ethical obligations we have as researchers is to obtain informed consent from our subjects. Though consent documentation is but one part of the consent process, it is an important one, and we need to make sure that all subjects can use the information in the consent document to inform themselves of the research in which they are being asked to participate. One aspect of this obligation is to ensure that the reading level of the document is appropriate for the audience. To standardize this requirement, the MSU IRB requires that:

- All documentation for the **general public** be written at a 6th grade level (or lower).
- All documentation for **undergraduates** be written at a 12th grade level (or lower).
- All documentation for **children** be written at or below the grade level of the population.

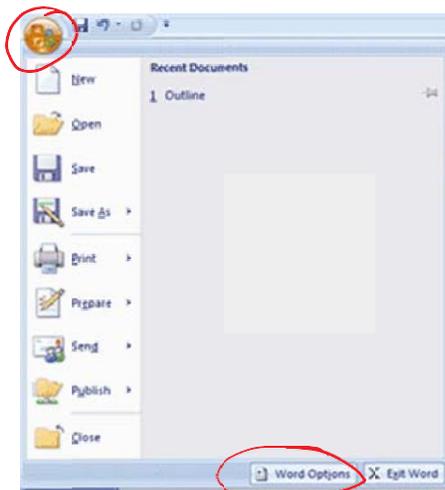
How do I determine my document's reading level?

The IRB uses Microsoft Word's grammar checker to quantify reading level. By default, MS Word does not check for readability when you check for grammar and spelling. MS Word must be manually set up to check for readability. To do this, please follow the directions below.

Step 1

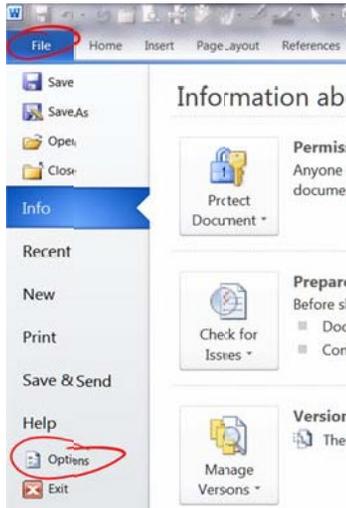
For Word 2007

Click the “Orb in the top left corner, then select “Word Options” on the bottom of the tab that opens.



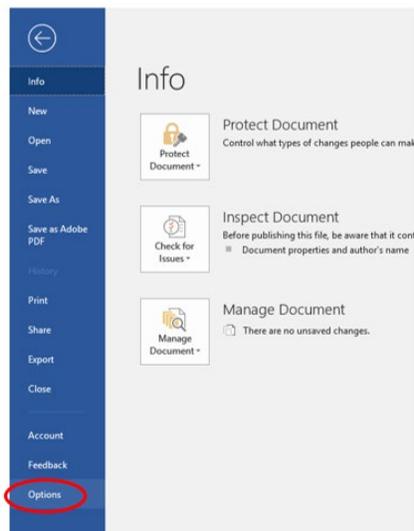
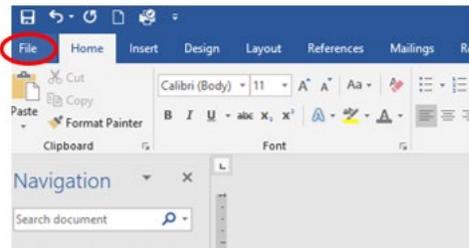
For Word 2010

Go to the “File” menu/ribbon and select “Options” on the lower left-hand side under “Help”.



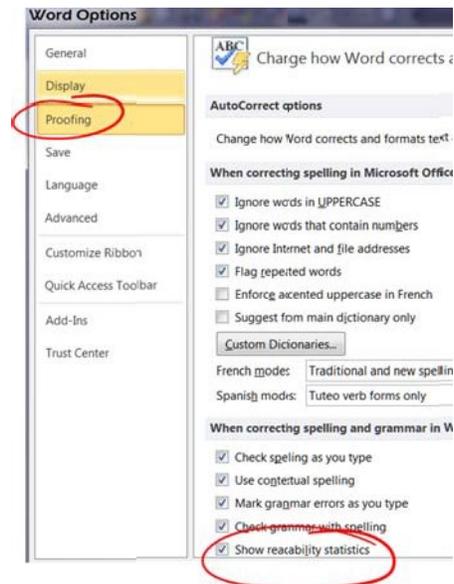
For Word 2013

Go to the “File” menu/ribbon at the top left and then select “Options” on the lower left-hand side of the new window.



Subsequent steps are identical in all Word versions.

Step 2

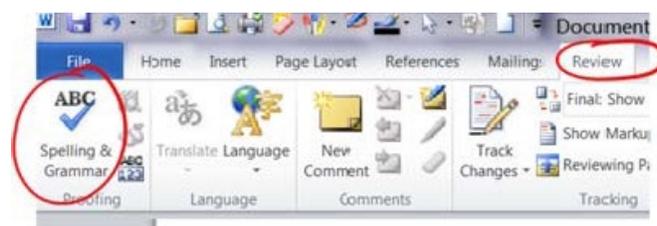


Select “Proofing” in the dialog that pops up; scroll down to view the “When correcting spelling and grammar in Word” area, and make sure the “Check readability statistics” box is checked.

(If you do this in Word without having a particular document loaded, it should make this the default setting for all new documents you create readability.)

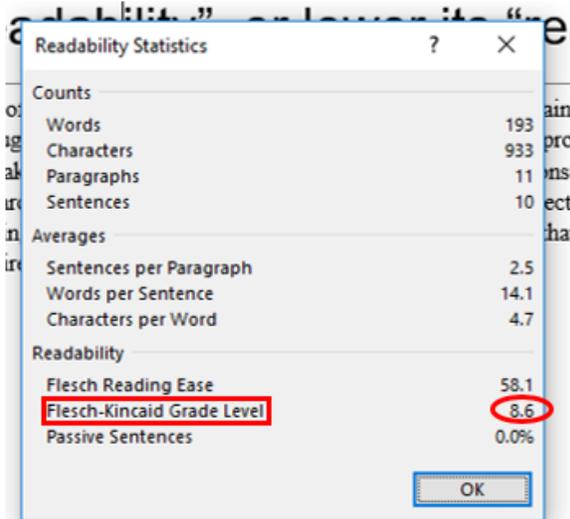
Step 3

Now that Word is set to check readability statistics, select the “Review” menu ribbon, and select “Spelling & Grammar” on the left side of the ribbon. Word will now check grammar and spelling throughout the document, and ask you to approve its suggested revisions. (Most of the time, it does a good job with this...)



Step 4

After completing the spelling and grammar check, Word will display a dialog box with readability statistics. The relevant number is the “Flesch- Kincaid Grade Level”.



How do I improve my 'score'?

The F-K number is based on simple measures of word and sentence complexity. ([See the Wikipedia page about the Flesch-Kincaid readability for more details.](#)) The remedy to a high score is to shorten sentences and reduce word complexity. Some ways to do this include eliminating or moving clauses, reducing passive verb use, and avoiding jargon or sophisticated vocabulary.

For example, “If you consent to participate in this research study you will have the opportunity to ask any additional questions you may have as well as withdraw from the study at any time” (F-K grade level of 15.3) might be rephrased as “Even after you agree to be in the study, you can ask questions about it at any time. You may also stop participating whenever you like.” (F-K grade level of 7.6.)