WHERE'S THE LET'S HAVE LUNCH KEY?

SPY *Test-Drives Computer Editing Software*

*t*he 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

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