

forum

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Are 4-H Leaders' Guides Readable? Putting a project guide in the hands of a volunteer 4-H leader is one method of helping the volunteer leader teach a 4-H project. A good leader's guide, with telephone help from an Extension agent, is becoming a primary link in the Extension educational system. Written material, however, must communicate with its intended audience to be of any value.

What Was Done

A survey was conducted to see if 4-H leaders' guides were generally written at the ninth-grade readability level, the standard for adult reading materials. The Dale-Chall readability test was used as a standard for evaluation as it's widely accepted as the most accurate of the several available.

Through a random number selection process, 11 states and 1 Canadian province were chosen to provide samples of leaders' guides for the survey. Alabama, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Wyoming, and Saskatchewan (Canada) were drawn.

The 4-H staffs were asked to select three 4-H leaders' guides, 1 each in agriculture, home economics, and an "other" category that fit neither of the first 2 categories. Junior leader and community development books were most often contributed as "other." A notable exception was one on motorcycle safety. In all, 33 leaders' guides were examined. Two 4-H staffs didn't provide booklets in all categories because they didn't produce their own materials in the selected categories.

What Was Found

The readability of leaders' guides ranged from grade 5 to grade 15 (college junior). The greatest number of manuals—14—fell within the 9th and 10th grade level, 9 manuals were within the 7th and 8th grade level, and 6 manuals were within the 11th and 12th grade level. All 3 categories had 1 manual within the 13th to 15th grade level. One manual was within the 5th and 6th grade level.

Readability of 33 Selected Leaders' Guides

Category	Grade level				
	5/6	7/8	9/10	11/12	13-15
Agriculture		2	3	4	1
Home economics		6	3	1	1
Other	1	1	8	1	1
Total	1	9	14	6	3

From the sample taken, Extension writers are producing 73% of the 4-H leaders' guides at a readability level that should be comprehended with ease by the target audience. Readability level increased in difficulty as the subject became more technical; for example, as in an engineering project on bicycle safety.

Project guides for adult leaders have a much greater tendency to be understood by their intended audience—adults—than project books for youth. In an earlier report,¹ only 33% of the basic 4-H project books were written at an appropriate reading level for the target audience of 4-H youth.

In this sample, many, but not all, 4-H leaders' project guides in the United States and Canada were written at levels that adults in both countries can read with ease. Even so, more than a quarter of these adult publications could be difficult. Writing for adults and youth can be improved by reducing sentence length, using less jargon, using shorter and more familiar words, including glossaries, and repeating words used and explained earlier in the text.

Volunteer leaders deserve the best help we can give them. Providing readable guides for leaders is one way to start. Don't you agree!

Footnote

1. Jerry H. Reyburn, "Are 4-H Projects Readable?" *Journal of Extension*, XVII (September/October, 1979), 10-14.