



## 5.2

## Appropriate levels of communication

In this activity students pick out what makes a science story accessible and learn how to write at an appropriate level for a particular audience.

**Outcomes**

Students will be able to:

- write successfully for a desired audience
- use the Gunning fog index (GF index) to analyse their own writing.

**Time required**

Allow one hour.

**Outline of the activity**

In linguistics, the GF index is a test designed to measure the readability of a sample of English writing. The resulting number is an indication of the years of formal education that a person requires in order to understand the text easily on the first reading. That is, if a passage has a GF index of 12, it has the reading level of a year twelve student. The test was developed by Robert Gunning, an American businessman, in 1952.

The GF index is generally used by people who want their writing to be read easily by a large segment of the population. Texts that are designed for a wide audience generally require a GF index of less than 12.

It is important to consider how important the GF index is for different audiences.

Start off with extract 1 and extract 2 on the briefing sheet ('Scintillate' and 'A research team') and ask students to work out what they think both mean. Tell students they are likely to know both as famous nursery rhymes, but they are difficult to recognise because of the style they're written in ('Twinkle twinkle' and 'Jack and Jill'). They can use the dictionary (or thesaurus) to help them.

Some more examples of these texts are available on 'If scientists wrote nursery rhymes': [http://www.rfcafe.com/miscellany/humor/scientists\\_nursery\\_rhymes.htm](http://www.rfcafe.com/miscellany/humor/scientists_nursery_rhymes.htm).

Once students have worked these out, ask them to get into twos or threes and using the three different pieces of text provided (see 'Resources required') work out the GF index for each. Run through how to calculate the GF index as given on their briefing sheet.

Ask students then to choose a paragraph of their own writing, and find out the GF index, and say what they think about this. Have a discussion about their answers to the final questions on their briefing sheet. Do students think that scientists have a responsibility to make themselves understood - to all, or just other scientists? Do all scientists understand all science?

**Tips and strategies**

It is useful to comment on and get students to comment on the style and clarity of texts they engage with in their studies. This encourages a more critical appreciation of written style.

