

Sherlock Holmes's Five Stories: Readability Factors Measured/Not Measured

By Marino C. Alvarez

“Why do you not write them yourself?” I said,
with some bitterness. “I will, my dear Watson, I will.”

(The Adventure of the Abbey Grange)



“The Veiled Lodger”

Drawing by Frank Wiles

The Strand Magazine, February 1927

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Sherlock Holmes is emphatic in his retort to Watson's challenge of writing the stories himself. Sherlockian scholars such as Christopher Morley, Edgar Smith, and Lord Donegall have advocated for the inclusion of "The Man with the Watches" and "The Lost Special" into the Canon. Others, Jay Finley Christ and John Bennett Shaw, have vociferously argued against inserting these two stories each of which appeared in the *Strand Magazine* in July and August, 1898, respectively. To add to this discussion is the contention that some believe, like Edgar Smith, that Sherlock Holmes wrote "The Lost Special," "The Man with the Watches, and "His Last Bow."¹ Exploring this premise that Sherlock Holmes wrote five stories, the purpose of this essay is to examine the degree of ease or difficulty a reader experiences when reading these stories as determined by the Fry Readability Formula, and to focus attention on those factors not measured by a readability formula.

In *The Case-Book*, Sherlock Holmes writes two of his own exploits in the first person: "The Blanched Soldier" and "The Lion's Mane." Previously, I randomly selected three passages from each of these two stories and applied the Fry Readability Formula to determine if there was a difference in the number of sentences and syllables, and degree of ease or reading difficulty when compared to Dr. Watson's writing of "The Final Problem," "The Creeping Man," and "The Golden Pince-Nez."² Five stories alleged to be written by Sherlock Holmes were compared using the Fry Formula. The two aforementioned, "The Man with the Watches" told in the first-person narrative, "The Lost Special" and "His Last Bow" both written in the third- person narrative.

When reading these five stories there are a variety of factors that affect the ease or difficulty of readability. One is the use of specialized vocabulary requiring the reader to understand sentences within the context in which the word appears. Another is an author's writing style that not only informs but can initiate a curiosity that enables a reader to better understand the characters, theme, plot, and culture of a story's setting. Words and their meaning are crucial for a reader's understanding of the events that are taking place within a story. In addition to words that may not be known or have multiple meanings, or foreign phrases that need explanation, are many other factors that need to

¹ Cited in Peter Haining, *The Final Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1995, p. 15.

² Marino C. Alvarez, *A Professor Reflects on Sherlock Holmes*. London: MX Publishing, 2012.

be considered when pairing a reader with a Sherlock Holmes written story, in particular, and other narrative and expository texts in general.

In accordance with the Fry Readability Formula guidelines, I implemented the following procedures.³ First, I selected randomly a 100-word passage from each of the specified five stories. Second, I counted the number of sentences within these hundred words estimating the last sentence to the nearest tenth. Third, I counted and recorded the number of syllables of this one- hundred-word passage. Fourth, the total number of sentences and total number of syllables per sentences for each passage was divided by 3. The results were applied to the Fry Graph to determine the approximate instructional reading level of the story. There is a standard error of plus or minus one grade level. The two stories appearing in the Canon written by Sherlock Holmes, “The Blanched Soldier” and “The Lion’s Mane” were compared against “The Man with the Watches,” “The Lost Special”, and “His Last Bow.” The approximate instructional grade level by passage and number of sentences and syllables per 100 words are shown in Table for the five stories.⁴

Table. Approximate Instructional Reading Level of the Five Stories.

Story	Total No. of Sentences Per 100 words ÷ 3	Total No. of Syllables Per 100 words ÷ 3	Approximate Instructional Grade Level
The Blanched Soldier	4.76	136	8
The Lion’s Mane	6.50	130	6
*Four Passages (÷ 4)	6.20	131	7
**Substitute Passage	5.70	392	7
The Man with the Watches	4.1	137	8
The Lost Special	4.0	148	10
His Last Bow	6.0	133	6

³ Edward Fry, “Fry’s Readability Graph: Clarifications, Validity, and Extension to Level 17.” *Journal of Reading*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (December, 1977): 242-252.

⁴ I have not included the calculations of the three passages used for each of the five stories due to space limitations.

“The Blanched Soldier,” “The Lion’s Mane,” “The Man with the Watches, and “His Last Bow” are within the 6th to 8th approximate grade level and with the standard error of plus or minus one make these stories compatible. “The Lost Special” is significantly above “The Lion’s Mane” and “His Last Bow” (level 6) with an approximate instructional level of 10. These examples illustrate that a readability formula can be manipulated to yield a reading “ease” or “difficulty” of a text depending on the number of sentences and word length within a one-hundred-word passage. When comparing these five stories, the higher number of syllables in the selected passages from “The Lost Special” influenced the results of a higher reading level. Likewise, the higher number of sentences in “His Last Bow” affected a lower readability than the story with its vocabulary and sentence length that may offer a challenge to a reader.

Factors Not Measured by Readability Formulas

Knowing the number of syllables and sentence length in a given story, while interesting, does little to reveal either the writing style or difficulty of a story. However, a 100-word count combined with the length of sentences within these 100 words can determine an “estimate” of ease or passage difficulty of a story. A readability formula gives the user an approximate “estimate” of passage difficulty and a grade level. I stress the word “estimate” in that these kinds of formulas cannot provide an absolute reading level of a text. Also, such formulas are often misused in educational settings by applying them to reading materials and held to represent an arbitrary and exact reading level. Readability formulas are but one measure of a text’s reading ease or difficulty. The readability level derived from these formulas measure sentence length as a constant with either word length or percent of unfamiliar words depending on the formula used to assess text difficulty. Among the variables *not* measured by readability formulas include: grammar, syntax, use of slang, concept word level, reader background, reader interest, size of print, words with multiple meanings, and obscure or archaic words.⁵

⁵ Others have used the Flesch Readability Formula to assess Sherlock Holmes stories with type of words and readability measures. See Pasquale Accardo, *Diagnosis and Detection, The Medical Iconography of Sherlock Holmes*, (London: Associated University Press, 1987); Charles Press, *Looking Over Sir Arthur’s Shoulder*, “Readability: Overcoming the Perils of Victoria Prose,” (Shelburne, Ontario: George A. Vanerburgh, Publisher, 2004); Wayne and Francine Swift, “The Associates of Sherlock Holmes,” *Baker Street Journal*, vol.49, no. 1 (March, 1999). The Flesch

Readability Checklists provide the user of readability formulas with more insight. A more comprehensive text review would be to use a Readability Checklist such as the one presented in Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz that provides a more comprehensive assessment of a text rather than relying on a number alone.⁶ In this checklist three areas of focus are understandability, usability, and interestability. The first area contains statements intended to assess the relationship between the reader's prior knowledge with the text's material. For example, are the assumptions about students' vocabulary knowledge appropriate? A second area, usability, contains two subsections: external and internal organizational features. External organizational features include whether the table of contents provides a clear overview of the text's content; the clarity of major and subheadings; and the degree to which visual aids are enablers to understand concepts. Internal evaluations include the inclusion of clear statements that define technical vocabulary; and whether the author uses patterns of organization (simple listing, time order, cause/effect, and comparison/contrast) to assist students in interpreting the text. The purpose of these statements is to determine characteristics of a writing style that can affect comprehension. The third domain of inquiry is interestability which is designed to assess the writing style and motivational purpose of a text and its accompanying materials.

Using a readability formula in concert with a readability checklist can provide more insight into a given text. Teachers use these assessments as guides rather than absolute measures to match reading materials to their students' interests and abilities. In the case of Sherlock Holmes's writing of the two stories in the canon, the assessment as to his writing style and approximate level of reading ability compared with the random samples selected of the three stories show a relative consistency in the number of words used and the level as shown by the Fry Graph of reading difficulty.

measures sentence length and word length like the Fry Readability formula, but counts sentences differently in that a sentence that has periods, explanation points, colons and semicolons serve as sentence delimiters and denotes the end of a sentence. The range of application for the Fry is 1 – college; Flesch, 5 – college. Both the Fry and the Flesch have a standard error of estimate in terms of grade level as approximately 1.00.

⁶ Richard T. Vacca, Jo Anne Vacca and Maryann Mraz, *Content Area Reading* (Boston: Pearson, 2011), 113-119.

Discussion

Comparing the writings of the three Sherlock Holmes Canon passages to “The Man with the Watches” and “The Lost Special” does not clarify the controversy of authorship of the five stories. Paralleling the five stories does indicate that when taking three random passages of 100-words, counting both sentence length and word length within each of the four stories, three stories are compatible with the index of approximate instructional reading level among each story. The outlier being “The Lost Special.”

Readability formulas and word lists used to measure ease or difficulty of text difficulty can be manipulated. If the sentences are short and the words used contain fewer syllables per word, a passage can be reported at a certain readability level, when in essence, it may be more difficult to understand in a meaningful manner. For example, “In “The Man with the Watches” the word “dust-cloak” appears in the sentence, “The bag, containing the dust-cloak, which I had thrown out of the window, may have fallen among some bramble patch where it is still concealed, or may have been carried off by some tramp, or may have come into the possession of the police.” If we apply the formula to this sentence it is rather benign, although the sentence is somewhat long, the syllable count is minimal. However, what is not taken into consideration in this formula is the hyphenated word “dust-cloak” that may cause confusion for a reader with its meaning. In this context, a “dust-cloak” is a loose outer piece of clothing without sleeves that fastens at the neck and hangs from the shoulders. This example sentence might score well for ease of reading, but it actually could challenge comprehension.

A caution is repeated that a readability formula provides an “estimate” of passage difficulty. As noted above, the scores on 3 passages can vary depending on word choice or sentence complexity, and calculations may vary with other selected passages within in each respective story. Formulas should not be used as sole determiners when matching a Sherlock Holmes writing with an individual. Factors not measured by readability formulas are presented to emphasize that their consideration is significant. Other important factors that override readability formulas are a reader’s purpose, interest, motivation, and prior knowledge with the content that is to be read. So, the degree of ease or difficulty that these five stories, that some scholars have attributed to be written by the hand of Sherlock Holmes, are to be comprehended rests with the reader.

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Marino C. Alvarez, Ed.D., BSI
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