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A Readability Study of the White House Website

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Introduction

This paper will investigate the degree of readability in language used in the website of the White House. It is important to make clear what readability means in this essay. Readability can be described as “ease of reading” or “ease of understanding” It can also be explained as how easy a text is to understand for its reader. There are quite a few factors that contribute to making a text difficult to comprehend: the level of formality is a great contributor. The span of formality is wide but this paper will focus on the use of nominalization and the use of passive verb constructions. The Gunning FOG index and The Flesch Reading Ease formula will be used to measure the levels of readability. The use of the two before-mentioned formulas is applied to the texts for comparison. The levels of readability for each and every text will also be presented and compared. Since the White House’s website is a tool which many people with different backgrounds access, it is interesting to see what levels of readability it has.

The study is based on six different texts from the website of the White House. It will examine which level of readability the website of the White House has in its different subsections. The research questions of this essay are: Are the reading grade levels of the White House website too high? Is the percentage of nominalization, and the use of passive constructions together with the *be*-passive and the *get*-passive above desired levels?

The website consists of seven different subsections with sub-headlines, although only six texts will be analyzed since one feature contains no text, only photos and videos.

This paper has four chapters. The first chapter consists of background information about the White House’s website, what readability is, the history of readability formulas, and its limitations. The second chapter explains which method will be used for the analysis. Chapter three explains which texts will be studied, and chapter four presents the analysis and its results. This chapter is divided into subchapters for each aspect analyzed, and a discussion of results will follow. Lastly, there is a conclusion, where questions raised in this essay will be answered with help of results attained.

1. Background

The official website of the White House, United States of America, is likely to generate several thousand hits a day. The information put on the webpage reaches every person who owns or has the opportunity to use a computer and the Internet. A lot of people who seek information about the Government, the President, American laws and many other facts are likely to choose the Internet as means to find it first-hand. As an electronic portal towards, not just American citizens but perhaps also, tourists, journalists, immigrants and students, therefore it is most important that the level of readability is not too high in general and that the information shared on the website is easy to understand for everyone. Firstly there are many citizens in America that speak English as a second language, and secondly, tourists from other countries may not have great skills in understanding and reading highly advanced English.

It is stated by the National Adult Literacy Study that the average adult in America reads at the level of a 7th grade student. DuBay mentions that there are experts in health literacy who advise that texts written for the public should be at a level of fifth or sixth-grade of readability. A text that exceeds the reading ability of its readers usually means that the reader stops reading it (DuBay 1).

In his *Guide to Plain English*, Cutts states that in texts that are intended to reach mass audience, a reading level of 13 year-olds (grade 8-9 in America) should be strived for. The reading level of a 13-year old is the level that an average adult has, although a reading age of 16 is actually necessary for getting by on a daily basis. There are very few people that have a reading level above 21. The reading level of a person is also likely to sink after their education has ended if they do not have to read difficult texts in their profession or spare time. A person who reads very little might get a lower reading level as a result. Cutts also says that most people preferably read texts that are below their particular reading age.

1.2. What is readability and Reading Grade Level?

Readability is defined by George Klare as “the ease of understanding or comprehension due to the style of writing” (DuBay 3). This particular definition highlights writing style as separate from content, coherence and organization. In a similar way, Gretchen Hargis and her IBM colleagues claim that readability, the “ease of reading words and sentences”, is a trait of clarity (DuBay 3). G. Harry McLaughlin, who created the SMOG readability formula,

characterizes readability as “the degree to which a given class of people find certain reading matter compelling and comprehensible” (DuBay 3). McLaughlin emphasizes the interaction between the text and its readers and the known characteristics behind it, such as reading skill, prior knowledge about the subject, and motivation to read.

Formulas for measuring readability first started to develop in the 1920’s so textbook writers could make use of them. Since 1920 hundreds of formulas have been developed (Davison & Green 6). Formulas constructed for measuring readability are commonly used in a range of situations where evaluation of text complexity is considered necessary (Davison & Green 7). In today’s society public documents such as insurance policies, tax forms and contracts for example must meet certain criteria when it comes to level of readability.

According to the Business Dictionary, a reading grade level or a RGL is defined as a number assigned to the level of complexity of a reading material; it equates to a given level of schooling, for example, a reading grade level of seven means the reading material is intended for a 7th grade student. It is important to recognize that levels may differ between different formulas.

Which reading grade level a text achieves is connected to the primary use of the text. Texts used for independent, unassisted, or recreational use are higher leveled than texts that are meant for school children and learning experience. With another explanation, the same text is easier to understand for those who have more developed reading skills than for those who have poorer reading skills (DuBay 7).

The number of years of completed studies is not a suggestion of a person’s reading level. In his article, DuBay says that a typical high-school graduate reads at the level of 9th grade, which means that many people read below that number. People who practice in certain fields of knowledge are more likely to develop higher levels of reading skills in their particular areas of knowledge than they have for general reading. College students, who favor reading at the 10th grade level, may rather read more difficult texts within their own subject. Students who are poor readers of common texts used in classrooms are often more likely to handle and understand difficult texts that appeal to their interests.

1.3. The Readability Formulas

During the 1920’s, some educators suggested a way to use the difficulty of vocabulary and sentence length to calculate the difficulty level of a certain text. They used this technique in readability formulas, which actually have demonstrated their usefulness in over 80 years of

application. The readability formulas were used extensively in genres like journalism, research, health care, law, insurance and industry. Later, by the 1980's, there were about 200 different formulas and over a thousand different studies published on the readability formulas confirming their powerful theoretical and statistical validity.

1.4. The Classic Readability Studies

The purpose of the classic readability studies was first to find useful methods of matching reading material to students and their abilities and knowledge. These attempts focused on creating easy and useable readability formulas for teachers and librarians. However, the first study of adult literacy in the United States during the 1930's raised concerns about having graded texts for adults, and so the studies consist of three milestone characteristics: 1) statistical analysis of literature, 2) vocabulary-frequency lists and 3) classic readability studies. Teachers, librarians, and publishers saw the need for new methods for deciding the reading level of a text.

Lucius Adelno Sherman was a professor of English Literature at the University of Nebraska. L.A. Sherman was the first to use statistical analysis when analyzing readability of texts, and he introduced a new and objective method of literary criticism (DuBay11). L.A. Sherman compared texts from older prose writers with more popular modern writers. He came to the conclusion that sentences progressively had shortened over time. Sherman further examined this statistically and started by counting standard sentence length per 100 periods (DuBay 10). His work was a milestone for a century of studies of reading and his findings suggested that literature is a topic for statistical examination; if sentences are shorter and terms are concrete, readability will be higher. He also stated that written language is less efficient than spoken language and that, over time, if it becomes more like spoken language, written language will be more efficient.

In the 1920's there were two great trends that motivated a new interest in the issue of readability because populations of schools were changing; the number of children of immigrants attending school was increasing, and teachers noticed that textbooks were too advanced for these students to understand. The other trend was the increasing use of scientific tools for examining and objectively assessing educational difficulties. Thorndike's *Teacher's Word Book* was such a tool. Edward L. Thorndike observed that language teachers from Germany and Russia used word counts to match texts with students. They established that a word that is used more frequently is more familiar and easy to use. Thorndike started to

calculate the frequency of words in English texts in 1911; by 1921 his book *The Teachers Word Book* was published. It listed 10,000 words by frequency of use. Thorndike's *Teacher's Word Book* was the first vast listing of words by frequency in English. It gave teachers objective resources for measuring difficulty of words and texts. It became a foundation for nearly all the research on readability that followed. Before the help of technology, publishers, teachers and educators regularly used word-frequency lists to help assess reading materials. Also, the work of Thorndike was the foundation for the first readability formulas for books for children (DuBay 12). Thorndike's work was followed by substantial studies on vocabulary. Klare (1968) states the following about the research made on word frequency:

Not only do humans tend to use some words much more often than others, they recognize more frequent words more rapidly than less frequent, prefer them, and understand and learn them more readily. It is not surprising, therefore, that this variable has such a central role in the measurement of readability. (DuBay 13)

In 1981, *The Living Word Vocabulary: A National Vocabulary Inventory* was published, the authors Edgar Dale and Joseph O'Rourke based their work on Thorndike's findings and also on their own results of a 25-year long study. The study contained the grade-level results of the familiarity of 44,000 words. This was the first time that scores were given for each of the meanings a word can have. It also illustrated the percentage of readers in the particular grade who are familiar with the word. Dale and O'Rourke's work is seen as exceptional and is regarded to be the one of best aids in writing for a targeted grade level (DuBay 13).

Harry D. Kitson, a psychologist who wrote *The Mind of the Buyer*, came to the conclusion that sentence length and the length of words measured in syllables are vital measures of determining readability (DuBay 13). Three decades later Rudolf Flesch would implement both these variables in his Reading Ease Formula.

Bertha A. Lively and Sidney L. Pressey had concerns about the problem of selecting textbooks in science for junior high school students. Because the textbooks contained advanced technical words, teachers had to spend much time explaining the vocabulary of the textbooks. Lively and Pressey thought that a way to measure and decrease the difficulty of vocabulary would be very helpful. They wrote an article that presented the first readability formula for children. In every count of a thousand words, it calculated the amount of different

words, the amount of words that were not on the list of 10,000 words by Thorndike, and the median index number of words that were found in Thorndike's book. They concluded that the best indicator of determining difficulty of vocabulary was the median index number. They also found that high index numbers meant that vocabulary was easier and that low index numbers meant more difficult vocabulary. This particular study greatly influenced following readability studies (DuBay 14).

Mabel Vogel and Carleton Washburne, studied the structural characteristics of a text; they were also the first ones to apply a criterion based on an empirical evaluation of text (DuBay 14). The Winnetka formula, as it was called, was the first that calculated complexity by grade levels, and it was a prototype of modern readability models. Vogel and Washburne's work inspired Alfred S. Lewerenz to create a number of readability formulas for the Los Angeles School District. Researchers W.W. Patty and W.I. Painter developed a formula that calculated the relative difficulty for textbooks. They based the formula on a combination of frequency established by Thorndike's list and diversity of vocabulary – how many different words there are in a text.

Yet another researcher, Ralph Ojemann was not an inventor of a new formula, but he created a technique to measure the difficulty of texts for adult parent-education materials. As a criterion, he used 16 passages taken from magazines, each of 500 words. He was the first one to come up with the idea to use adults when establishing the complexity of his criterion. Ojemann gave every text passage the grade level of the reader who knew the answer to at least half of the multiple-choice questions about the passage they just read. He highlighted qualitative factors like abstractness for example; even though Ojemann was not capable of expressing the qualitative variables in numeric terms, he demonstrated that they could not be ignored (DuBay 16).

Robert Gunning, the creator of the FOG index, started as a graduate of Ohio State University. In 1935, Gunning started to work within the area of textbook publishing. At the same time, educators discovered that not all high school graduates could read. Gunning came to the conclusion that a great part of the reading problem was actually a writing problem. He discovered that newspapers and the world of business contained a lot of "fog" and redundant difficulty. He was one of the first to introduce the new readability research into the workplace. Gunning founded the first consulting company having readability as its specialty in 1944. In the years to follow, he tested and collaborated with over 60 large city daily newspapers and popular magazines, helping them reduce readability levels in texts (DuBay 24).

One of the most prominent speakers for the need of readability in texts was Rudolf Flesch. Besides the fact that he worked as a readability consultant, lecturer, and a teacher, he also published several studies and almost 20 popular books regarding English usage and readability. In 1947, he got a Ph.D. in educational research for his thesis *Marks of a Readable Style*. This particular thesis set a course for his career in the field of readability. In the thesis, Flesch's first readability formula was published. The formula was invented for measuring adult reading material. The variables of the formula consisted of affixes and "personal references" such as personal pronouns and names (DuBay 21). Flesch's formula became the most commonly used and also one of the most tested and dependable. Many publishers rapidly discovered that Flesch's formula had the possibility to increase readership by 40-60 percent and people started using his formula in their studies of varied fields within communication. The work of Flesch had a vast impact on journalism. Along with Robert Gunning, who worked with United Press, Flesch was a consultant for Associated Press. Together they managed to bring down the reading grade level of front page text from a level of 16 to 11. The news reports still remain at that level today (DuBay 23).

The formulas of Gunning and Flesch mark the end of the first "era" of readability research. These authors highlighted the problem of readability difficulties, making the public aware of its existence. Because of them, readers demanded that documents and texts should be written in a more understandable way. They also inspired new readability studies, focusing on how to develop existing formulas and also finding other features affecting readability.

1.5. The New Studies

The new era was a phase of improvement and deeper study of readability. Researchers wanted to learn more about how the readability formulas work, and how they could be improved. Due to developments in society in the 1950's the field of readability also developed. The demands of new technologies generated a great need for better reading skills among people. People working at older manufacturing industries were not required to have as advanced reading skills as those working with new technology (DuBay 24).

A great interest in the readability of children's literature was shown by Gates and Zeller at approximately the same time. One factor playing a great part, in their opinion, was reading ease. The new studies would find that, alongside lexis and sentence structure, the reading ability of the reader, previous knowledge and motivation are also important contributors to text readability (DuBay 25). Many factors contributed to the characterization of the new readability studies:

Wilson Taylor's cloze test helped researchers to investigate the properties of texts and readers with more correctness and precision. Reading ability, prior knowledge, interest, and motivation were also fields of interest; several studies researched the manner in which these reader variables have an effect on readability. Another factor was reading efficiency, these studies examined the effects on reading speed and perseverance unlike the earlier studies that looked at the effects of readability on understanding. The measurement of content is also a contributing factor; in the 1980's cognitive psychology and linguistics influenced renewed research of cognitive and structural features in the text and how they can help to calculate readability. Referring to the use of text leveling, linguistic and cognitive theory refreshed interest in the qualitative and subjective evaluation of readability. If exercised enough, leveling can be useful in estimating the features of texts not dealt with in the formulas. Producing and transforming texts are important factors as well; a number of studies observed how effective it is to use the variables of the formula when writing and revising a text. Writers who focus on content, coherence, and organization, and use the variables of readability can be more efficient in producing and transforming a text to a certain required level of reading. New readability formulas were developed, John Bormuth and others conducted wide studies of readability which examined the reliability of a broad variety of measurable variables of texts. The researchers created an empirical base for criterion scores and criterion texts for the progress of new formulas and modification of old formulas. Lastly formula discrepancy contributed to the new readability studies. This was an examination of the inconsistency between the outcomes of different formulas and how they can be beneficial for writers (DuBay 26).

Several experts have, through thorough research, found some guidelines for good readability. The main rules are to use words that are short, easy and familiar. Use of simple sentences, an active voice and present tense also simplifies understanding of texts (DuBay 2). It is established by research that the best tools for predicting text difficulty and the most commonly used variables in readability formulas are semantic measure and syntactic measure. Semantic measure could be complexity of vocabulary while syntactic measure would include noun phrase structure or voice (DuBay 19).

1.6. Limitations of Readability Formulas

Many researchers recommend that readability formulas are best used in combination with other techniques of measuring and writing texts, because of limitations of the formulas.

Ojemann warned against the formulas being applied automatically. George Klare et al declared:

For these reasons, formula scores are better thought of as rough guides than as highly accurate values. Used as rough guides, however, scores derived from readability formulas provide quick, easy help in the analysis and placement of educational material. (DuBay 20)

Flesch, Klare and Gunning also put focus on rhetorical features like organization, coherence, design, and content when studying readability. Making use of the readability formulas alongside good writing techniques leads to greater understanding by readers (DuBay 20).

Vocabulary and sentence structure together with a person's reading ability, motivation and prior knowledge have great influence in text readability (DuBay 28).

Readers that do not have sufficient background knowledge for a piece of text will most likely find it harder to read and to comprehend than people who have the required knowledge. A text whose substance and way of presenting information is uninteresting to the reading audience is less well understood than a text passage that attracts a reader's particular interests (Davison & Green 49).

2. Method

In this investigation of readability of the website of the White House three different analyses will be carried out. It is important to make clear what limitations there will be. Readability levels will be examined with the help of two different readability formulas; the FOG index and the Flesch Reading Ease formula. The level of formality will be investigated by looking at nominalizations and passive constructions. This section will further describe the readability formulas and the two grammatical constructions.

2.1. The FOG Index and the Flesch Reading Ease Formula

The FOG index measures which level of readability a text is assumed to have. When using the formula, average sentence length and percentage of hard words are the factors taken into consideration. Hard words are those that contain three syllables or more. To be clear, the FOG index can be used to make an approximate estimation of reading difficulty; it is somewhat limited in measuring readability since there are more factors involved than the ones used in this particular index, although, as said, it is used to make a general measurement.

The different grade levels begin with 9 which stands for the difficulty level of texts that ninth graders are expected to understand, 11 is eleventh grade, 15 is junior year in college and 18 is graduate level or more (Course Compendium, p. 2). In other words, the level stands for years of education that a person should have for reading and easily understanding a text. These figures are American and in Britain readability levels are measured by age instead. (Cutts 101).

Table 1: A comparison of reading age and reading grade (Cutts 101).

Reading Age in the United Kingdom (Years)	Comparable US Grade (Grade in school)
10	5
11	6
12	7
13 – 14	8 – 9
15 – 17	10 – 12
18 – 21	13 – 16
Graduate	Graduate

This formula is used for the FOG index

$$\text{Reading Level (Grade)} = 0.4(\text{ASL} + \% \text{HW})$$

“ASL” stands for Average Sentence Length and “%HW” stands for percentage of Hard Words. It is best to use texts that have 100 words or more to achieve a better understanding of how many hard words that occur in texts. To obtain the average sentence length, the number of words shall be divided by the number of sentences. For percentage of hard words, the number of hard words are divided by the whole number of words and then taken times 100. Words that are seen as hard are those which contain three syllables or more, they can also be called complex words. It is important to point out that a word that is a combination of short words (like homemade), or a verb form that has more syllables by adding -ed,-es, or -ing or a proper name cannot be counted as a hard word (Course Compendium 3).

Finally, the reading level (grade) is obtained by using the formula and the achieved numbers.

A calculation of a text could look like this:

Suppose that the text contains 116 words, 5 sentences, 18 hard words.

$$\text{ASL} = 116/5 = \underline{23.2}$$

$$\%HW = 18/116 \times 100 = \underline{15.52}$$

$$(23.2 + 15.52) \times 0.4 = \underline{15.48}$$

According to this calculation the FOG index is set to 15.48 which is the difficulty level of junior year in college or 18-21 years in British measurements.

When using the Flesch Reading Ease formula, counting the number of words in the text is step one. The next step is to count the number of all syllables in the words. The number of sentences is also to be calculated, and here a sentence is anything followed by a full-stop, colon, semi-colon, dash, question mark, or exclamation mark. The number of syllables is divided by the numbers of the words to attain the average numbers of word per sentence of the text. After that the average length of words is multiplied by 84.6. Then the average sentence length is taken times 1.015. The two numbers are added together and then subtracted from 206.835. The result is the readability score.

Here follows an example of a calculation:

Total words in a text: 154. Total syllables: 244. Total sentences of the text: 8.

$$\text{AWL: } 244/154 = 1.584$$

$$\text{ASL: } 154/8 = 19.25$$

$$1.584 \times 84.6 = 134.006$$

$$19.25 \times 1.015 = 19.539.$$

$$134.006 + 19.539 = 153.543$$

$$206.835 - 53.29$$

The readability score is 53.29, which results in fairly difficult or 10th – 12th grade level.

(Crystal 270-71 2003).

Table 2: Reading Ease Scale (Cutts 101).

Readability Score	Style Description	Estimated Reading Grade
90 – 100	Very Easy	5 th
80 - 90	Easy	6 th grade
70 – 80	Fairly Easy	7 th grade
60 – 70	Standard	8 th – 9 th grade
50 – 60	Fairly Difficult	10 th – 12 th grade
30 – 50	Difficult	13 th – 16 th grade
0 – 30	Very Difficult	Graduate

2.2. Nominalization

In academic styles nominalizations are often used as an alternative to longer, clausal constructions. Nominalizations contain nouns which communicate verb-type meanings and adjective-type meanings. The use of nominalizations is more common in written styles than in spoken (Carter & McCarthy 539).

In *A Dictionary of Grammatical Terms in Linguistics*: nominalization is defined as:

Nominalization – 1: In morphology, a noun derived from a member of another lexical category, especially from a verb, such as arrival from arrive, response from respond and swimming from swim (as in Lisa’s swimming has improved).

2: In syntax, a noun phrase derived from another category which is not a projection of the lexical category noun, particularly from a verb phrase, or a sentence. Examples include [Lisa’s going topless] upset her father, [To quit your job] would be a mistake, and [That she smokes] surprises me (Trask 183).

The term nominalization is easier explained as a noun created from a verb (Cutts 121), or it could be seen as a process of turning actions into concepts. An example of nominalization is how the noun *preparation* takes its form from the verb *to prepare*. Here is a plain example of how nominalization works displayed; the first sentence contains a nominalization while the second does not;

Example 1:

- Our *preparation* for the exam was poorly performed.
- We *prepared* poorly for the exam (Cutts 121).

Nominalizations that end with suffixes like; –ation, -al, -ion, -ment and –ure are called derivative nouns (Svartvik & Sager 121).

Nominalization is seen as a more formal use of language than the use of a verb only. As recognized in the report *Formality of Language: definition, measurement and behavioral determinants*:

The nominal style is likely to be more monotonous, less personal, and more formal. It appears to be a carefully considered and closely monitored production. The verbal style, on the other hand, is characteristic of spontaneous, unreflective speech. It is immediate, informal and varied.

Heylighen and Dewaele state that formality is distinguished by objectivity, accuracy, inflexibility and cognitive load. Informality is characterized by being more flexible, straightforward and engaged; it is also more biased, less precise and not as informative. Nominalizations can help writing acquire a more formal tone and link to recurring ideas, although, if nominalization is used extremely often, it can make the writing rather incomprehensible (Heylighen & Dewaele 32).

Jan H. Spyridakis and Carol S. Isakson from the University of Washington conducted a study where nominalized texts were compared to denominalized texts (Spyridakis & Isakson 1). They let natives (American) and non-natives read texts that were full of nominalizations, and then texts that were denominalized but contained the same information. After reading the different passages the participants of the study answered questions about the texts. The result indicated that natives had greater comprehension when reading denominalized texts than nominalized. Non-natives on the other hand, preferred denominalized texts, but had greater success understanding nominalizations than natives. According to Spyridakis and Isakson the reason can be that non-natives are possibly more adjusted to nouns than verbs and clauses than native English speakers (Spyridakis & Isakson 19).

To calculate how large percentage of nominalizations is, the number of nominalizations found in the passages will be divided with the number of total words. In the article *Characteristics - Style Statistics with Support* by Smith and Tempest, general directions are given about how to write for better comprehension among

readers. The suggested level for occurrence of nominalization in general texts of 500 words or more is estimated to three percent (Smith & Tempest 1).

In this essay morphological nominalizations will be looked at, and the level suggested by Smith and Tempest will be used as measurement for the texts.

2.3. The passive voice

In the English language there are two different voices, the active and the passive voice. The use of a passive voice is often occurring in formal writing. When using the active voice the focus of the sentences is on the “actor”, as in the passive voice, the focus lies on the “action”, not the actor.

Example 2:

- The government broke the treaty between the two countries (active voice).
- The treaty between the two countries was broken (by the government) (passive voice) (Wright & Hope 69).

The examples above illustrate how a typical formation of passive construction is used. The active verb phrase turns into a passive one, and the object of the active phrase changes its roll into a subject instead. In English a passive construction is formed with a form of *be* and a *past participle* of the main verb.

Example 3:

- English *is spoken* by more than 300 million people.
- She *was expected* to be present at the meeting (Svartvik & Sager 80).

A passive construction is normally formed with the auxiliary *be* but it can also be formed with *get*. The use of *get* in passive constructions is seen as rather informal and it is used without an Agent (Svartvik & Sager 82).

Example 4:

- The Burglar *got (was) caught* the day after the break-in.
- The baby *doesn't get fed (isn't fed)* anything after eight in the evening (Svartvik & Sager 82).

“In a passive clause, the recipient of some action is typically expressed as the subject of the clause. The doer of the action may or may not be mentioned in the clause.” In other words, the

by-phrase (Agent) is often omitted (Hurford 154). The Agent is not necessary in passive constructions. A passive construction is useful in impersonal connotations when it is unnecessary or impossible to precise who is performing an action.

Example 5:

- The question *was discussed* at a staff meeting last week.
- Matters *will be sorted out* and a statement *will be made* in due course (Svartvik & Sager 81).

In English, a verb in a passive clause must be a transitive verb. It must be a transitive verb because the object of the active construction becomes the subject of the passive construction. In a passive construction, the subject of the clause correlates to the object in an active construction. In English, the correspondence may consist of both direct and indirect objects, given that the indirect object is not indicated by the preposition “to”. The active objects which changes into passive subjects are underlined below.

Example 6:

Active:

Eliza gave Johnny some flowers.

Eliza gave some flowers to Johnny.

(Hurford 155)

Passive:

Johnny was given some flowers by Eliza.

Some flowers were given to Johnny by Eliza.

Use of passive constructions in favor of active constructions is common in fields of business and government. It is seen as good writing since the level of formality when using passive constructions is regarded as high. Excessive use of passive constructions or high levels of formality can make the text difficult to understand (Cutts 50).

This essay will look upon passive constructions against active constructions in the texts, and a percentage will be calculated when dividing the number of passive and active constructions with the number of all constructions together.

The suggested limit for passive constructions (both finite and non-finite) in general in texts is five percent or less (Smith 67). Unfortunately I was not able to find a limit for only *be-* or *get* passives, but according to Smith the general opinion is to keep the percentage of passives as low as possible.

3. Material

This essay is an analysis based on six different texts taken from the official website of the White House and its administration. The website consists of seven different sections; *Our Government*, *Issues*, *About the White House*, *The Administration*, *Briefing Room*, *Blog* and *Photos & Video*. These sections have several subsections and a text was chosen from every one except *Photos & Video* since it contains only pictures and videos, no text.

Texts were chosen if they contained approximately 500 or more words. However, some texts do contain fewer than 500 words, since there were no longer texts to choose in the particular subsection. The intention was to choose texts that contained as few pictures or videos as possible. The chosen texts are:

- *Our Government – The Legislative Branch*
- *Issues – Education*
- *About the White House – History*
- *The Administration – The First Lady Michelle Obama*
- *Briefing Room – Presidential Actions*
- *Blog – Setting the Spending Record Straight.*

The first passage explains the functions and powers of the House of Representatives and the Senate. It explains the process of introducing bills and how they become laws. Furthermore, the text clarifies the rights of Congress and gives an oversight of government actions. The second text mainly describes investments made in the education system in America. It informs about which reforms and actions need to be done to further develop American education. The third text History contains different details about the White House, for example its value as a symbol, the person that designed the building, what different Presidents that lived there, and what mark they left on the White House. The fourth subsection informs the reader about Mrs. Michelle Obama's upbringing, her education, earlier work situation and current occupation. Text five is a proclamation made by the President, Barack Obama. The President talks about the national entrepreneurship week that takes place in the USA in November every year. He talks about how important it is to support entrepreneurship and visions and how commitment has helped the country during recession. The last text is a blog post, explaining why the administration has spent a lot of money between the fiscal years of 2008 and 2010. It also gives examples of what needs to be done to further improve the economic situation in America.

The blogpost *Setting the Spending Record Straight* and the text *Presidential Actions* are somewhat different from the other texts. Blogging is a phenomenon that started flourishing in the beginning of the 21st century. In his book *Language and the Internet* Crystal explains a blog as a web application which makes it possible for its user to enter, display, and edit posts at any time. Blogs can be used for many different purposes. It can be a personal diary displaying the author's interests or opinions. There are also corporate blogs, they are often maintained by an institution, and the main purpose of the blog is to bring news to, and inform a potential readership (Crystal 240 2006). The usefulness of blogs as a means of reaching the public and making people aware of events occurring in the world was soon realized by journalists, politicians and advertisers. A blog also provides the chance of obtaining feedback and opinion from its readers (Crystal 241 2006). Language in blogs is in general unmediated or as Crystal says: "The language of blogs displays the process of writing in its naked, unedited form" (Crystal 15 2006). The language of blogs tends to be more informal than formal because contracted forms like *do not* and *don't*, and use of subjective personal pronouns are common.

The text, which is a presidential proclamation, has similar features to a speech. It contains subjective personal pronouns like *I* and *we* and most of it is written in the present tense.

4. Analysis

The analysis of the texts contains three different elements, so therefore the analysis will be divided into three parts; an analysis of readability levels with help of the FOG index and the Flesch Reading Ease Formula, an analysis of the use of nominalization, and an analysis of the use of passive construction in texts. These will constitute a stylistic analysis regarding level of formality.

The simplest way to define a nominalization is a verb that is converted into a noun, an example is the verb *to prepare* which becomes *preparation* (Cutts 121). Nominalizations can be divided into morphological and syntactical ones, morphological nominalizations will be examined in this essay. The results of found nominalizations will be compared against Smith & Tempest's suggested level. The preferred level of nominalizations occurring in general texts is three percent (Smith & Tempest 1).

A passive construction is formed with the auxiliary *be* (sometimes *get*) and a past participle of the main verb (see example 3, Svartvik & Sager 80).

This section presents the results of the analysis, starting with analysis of readability formulas, occurrence of morphological nominalization follows and occurrence of passive construction is last. Each section ends with a discussion of the results.

4.1. The FOG Index and the Flesch Reading Ease Formula

4.1.1 *Our Government – The Legislative Branch*

The Legislative Branch was the longest text of all, containing 1660 words, 2534 syllables, 81 sentences and 285 hard words. The calculated score for the FOG index is 15, which is high. It means that the reader should at least have 15 years of education in order to understand the text well. The result from the Flesch Reading Ease is a bit lower with 56.9, according to Flesch's scale, which represent fairly difficult level on the readability scale. To be able to understand texts at the fairly difficult level the reader needs 10 to 12 years of education.

It is interesting that the score differs by at least three years in education, or is a grade lower with Flesch's formula. Translated into years of age, the FOG index score would equal to 18 to 21 years, which is very high for an informative piece of text. *The Legislative Branch* is graded both difficult, and fairly difficult according to both formulas (See table 2). One reason for achieving such high FOG index may be the number of hard words, 285 hard words out of 1660 in total may not seem much but it is 5.82 percent of the text, and some sentences are heavy to read since they contain many hard words. Here follows an example from the text, the hard words are underlined: *The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs are both devoted to overseeing and reforming government operations, and each committee conducts oversight in its policy area.*

4.1.2. *Issues – Education*

The passage has 785 words, 1353 syllables, 31 sentences, and 138 hard words. According to the FOG index, this text has a level of 17.1 which stands for the highest grade level – graduate. The score of the Flesch Reading Ease is similar with 35.3 which stands for difficult or, 13th to 16th grade. This text is determined as difficult by both readability formulas. The FOG index is slightly higher though. It is possible that the long sentences play a part in making the text less readable here is an example of a long sentence: *Our nation's economic competitiveness and the path to the American Dream depend on providing every child with an education that will enable them to succeed in a global economy that is predicated on knowledge and innovation.*

4.1.3. *About the White House – History*

The text consists of 764 words, 1070 syllables, 38 sentences, and 108 hard words. This gives a score of 13.7 and a reading age of 18 to 21 using the FOG index. Calculating the grade level with Flesch's formula the result is 67.9 which generates a score level equal to standard, or 8th to 9th grade. This is an interesting result; the results of the formulas differ by at least five years.

4.1.4. *The Administration – First Lady Michelle Obama*

The information about Michelle Obama contains 456 words, 726 syllables, 26 sentences, and 60 hard words. These figures present a result of 12.4 in grade level using the FOG index, and when using the Flesch Reading Ease formula the score 54.3 is calculated. Interpreting the score of the FOG index, it means a reading age of 15 to 17 years; doing the exact same with Flesch's formula gives a result which is fairly difficult or, 10th to 12th grade. This time, calculations from both formulas and results are fairly similar.

4.1.5. *Briefing Room – Presidential Actions*

The proclamation has 577 words, 1021 syllables, 22 sentences, and 138 hard words. This gives a FOG index of 20.5 which gives a level of high graduate and a score of 30.5 using Flesch's method. The equivalent of 30.5 in a reading grade would be very difficult or college graduate. Once again are the results quite even. The high scores can probably be related to the fact that the number of hard words is very high compared to the total number of words. For example, a sentence from the text consisting of only 14 words contains six hard words: Philanthropists can expand entrepreneurship education for ambitious students at underserved schools and community colleges.

4.1.6. *Blog – Setting the Spending Record Straight*

The Text Setting the Spending Record Straight contains 690 words, 994 syllables, 24 sentences, and 87 hard words. Adding up figures, there is a score of 16.5 for the FOG index. That gives a grade level of 13th to 16th or a reading age of 18 to 21. The result of calculating the figures for the Flesch Reading Ease formula is 55.8, which is the same as fairly difficult,

or 10th to 12th grade. This time the results do not match, and once again there is a difference of approximately five years of education between the two formulas.

4.1.7. Discussion

Comparing the formulas, it seems as if the FOG index is more likely to attain higher scores than Flesch's formula. This might have to do with the fact that when using the FOG index, number of hard words plays a great part and most likely has a great influence on the final score. Flesch's formula does not use percentage of hard words at all instead the number of syllables is focused on. Another reason why scores are quite high may have to do with the number of words compared to the number of sentences which seems quite low. Attention should be drawn to the fact that the grade levels are rather high for all the analyzed texts. The lexis of the texts is quite difficult with hard words, and long sentences.

4.2. Nominalization

In this subchapter the occurrence of nominalization in all analyzed text passages will be presented. The use of nominalization in texts and writing is more frequent in written academic styles than in spoken (Carter & McCarthy 142). A nominalization is defined as a verb converted into a noun, see example one (Cutts 121). There are two "branches" of nominalization, morphological and syntactical, in this essay morphological nominalizations will be analyzed.

4.2.1. *Our Government - The Legislative Branch*

As mentioned before, this is the longest text of them all, with 1660 words. It contains 53 nominalizations which gives a percentage of 3.19. The result of 3.19 would be seen as rather high since the maximum value should be three percent or less. Examples of nominalizations in the text: *constitution*, *legislation*, and *appointment*.

Table 3

Nominalization

Total sum of words in text	1660
Number of Nominalizations in text	53
Percentage of Nominalization	3.19 %

4.2.2 *Issues – Education*

This passage consists of a sum of 785 words in total, and 42 nominalizations were found altogether. The equation of results found has a percentage of 5.35, which is a very high number. It is at least 2.35 percent above the given estimation of what a text should have. This text has a formal tendency regarding use of nominalization. Examples of nominalizations found in the text: *education, innovation, and development*.

Table 4

Nominalization

Total sum of words in text	785
Number of Nominalizations in text	42
Percentage of Nominalization	5.35 %

4.2.3. *About the White House – History*

History about the White House contains 764 words; out of those 13 are nominalizations. Dividing the number of words by the number of nominalization, results in a score of 1.7 percent. A score of 1.7 is a low score, and therefore the text is not regarded as formal. Examples of nominalizations found in the text: *administration, recreation, and construction*.

Table 5

Nominalization

Total sum of words in text	764
Number of Nominalizations in text	13
Percentage of Nominalization	1.7 %

4.2.4. *The Administration – First Lady Michelle Obama*

The text passage about First Lady Michelle Obama contains 456 words, a total of 6 words are nominalizations. This gives a result of 1.31 percent. A result of 1.31 is a rather low result for nominalization; the formality level of this text is quite low regarding nominalization. Examples of nominalizations found in the text: *operator, director, and education*.

Table 6

Nominalization

Total sum of words in text	456
Number of Nominalizations in text	6
Percentage of Nominalization	1.31 %

4.2.5. *Briefing Room – Presidential Actions*

Presidential Actions consists of 577 words, and 24 of them are nominalizations. When calculated a number of 4.16 percent is estimated. This is a high score for percentage of nominalization, although this particular passage is a proclamation by the President; this may affect the outcome. In Heylighen and Dewaele’s *Formality of Language: definition, measurement and behavioral determinants* “formal speech” is defined as: “the type of speech used in situations when the speaker is very careful about pronunciation and choice of words and sentence structure. This type of speech may be used, for example, at official functions, and in debates and ceremonies” (Heylighen & Dewaele 2). Examples of nominalizations found in the text: *commitment, administration, and innovation.*

Table 7

Nominalization

Total sum of words in text	577
Number of Nominalizations in text	24
Percentage of Nominalization	4.16 %

4.2.6. *Blog – Setting the Spending Record Straight*

The Blog post contains 690 words altogether and 8 nominalizations. This gives a score of 1.16 percent, which is the lowest score compared to the other analyzed texts. The level of formality may be lower since it is a blogpost. Examples of nominalizations found in the text: *administration, foundation, and reduction.*

Table 8

Nominalization

Total sum of words in text	690
Number of Nominalizations in text	8
Percentage of Nominalization	1.16 %

4.2.7. Discussion

The scores from all six texts have varied. There is a range from the lowest score of 1.16 percent to the highest of 5.35 percent. Out of six passages, three have higher scores, and three have scores less than three percent. It is interesting to see that the texts that have achieved a score higher than three percent are: *Our Government – The Legislative Branch, Issues – Education*, and *Briefing Room – Presidential Actions*. All these three passages have a fairly political tone set to them. It is possible that the texts were composed with the intention to impress their readers. The three other texts; *About the White House - History*, *The Administration – First Lady Michelle Obama*, and *Blog – Setting the Spending Record Straight* are composed with less difficult vocabulary and do not have as much of a political tone as the other three.

4.3. Passive Construction

This section will present the findings of passive constructions in all six texts. In this part of the study passive constructions using the *be*-passive are looked at. After reading through all six texts no passive constructions with *get* were found so therefore there will be no analysis of *get*-passives. A passive construction is formed with the auxiliary verb *be* and a past participle of the main verb, see example three (Svartvik & Sager 80).

4.3.1. *Our Government – The Legislative Branch*

In the text of the Legislative Branch, passive constructions occur 32 times and active constructions occur 165 times. It means that this text has a percentage of 16. Sixteen percent is the highest score achieved of all texts, it is 11 percent above the desired level when it comes to use of passive constructions in texts. Regarding the level of formality with use of passive constructions, *Our Government – The Legislative Branch* has a high level of formality. Examples of found passive constructions in the text: *are elected*, *is composed*, and *have been elected*.

Table 9

Construction	Number	Percentage
Passive	32	16%
Active	165	84%
Total numbers	197	100%

4.3.2. *Issues – Education*

In the text *Issues – Education* passive constructions can be found 10 times, and active ones can be found 102 times. The percentage of passive constructions is 8.9. This score is seen as rather high, it scores almost double of how many passives a text should have. The text *Issues – Education* also has a high level of formality if measured with help of passive constructions. Examples of passive constructions found in the text: *may be used*, *is predicated*, and *are supported*.

Table 10

Construction	Number	Percentage
Passive	10	91.1%
Active	102	8.9%
Total numbers	112	100%

4.3.3. *About the White House – History*

The article of history contains a total of 10 passive constructions, and 63 active ones. The score is 13.7 percent which gives this text the second highest score of all texts. It is a high score, and the text has a high level of formality regarding use of passive constructions. Examples of passive constructions found in the text: *is recognized*, *were submitted*, and *was constructed*.

Table 11

Construction	Number	Percentage
Passive	10	13.7%

Active	63	86.3%
Total numbers	73	100%

4.3.4. *The Administration – First Lady Michelle Obama*

The text about First Lady Michelle Obama only consists of two passive constructions and of 53 active constructions. The score for *The Administration – First Lady Michelle Obama* achieves a score of 3.6 percent regarding passive constructions. This text scores under the desired level of five percent and it does not have a high level of formality. Examples of passive constructions found in the text: *being diagnosed* and *were born*.

Table 12

Construction	Number	Percentage
Passive	2	3.6%
Active	53	96.4%
Total numbers	55	100%

4.3.5. *Briefing Room – Presidential Actions*

The proclamation made by the President consists of only one passive construction and of 64 active ones. The reason why it has such low scores on passive construction can depend on the fact that the text is an actual proclamation, and passive constructions of all kinds do not occur as much as present or future tense in this text. The score for passive constructions is 1.5 percent and it is the lowest score of all texts. The level of formality in this text is low. The passive construction found in the text: *was proud*.

Table 13

Construction	Number	Percentage
Passive	1	1.5%

Active	64	98.5%
Total numbers	65	100%

4.3.6. *Blog – Setting the Spending Record Straight*

The post from the blog of the White House contains a total of five passive constructions and 80 active constructions. The score for use of passive constructions is 5.9 percent which is not too high. The desired level for passive constructions is five percent so 5.9 percent should be regarded as normal. Examples of passive constructions found in the text: *was sworn in*, *are built*, and *is required*.

Table 14

Construction	Number	Percentage
Passive	5	5.9%
Active	80	94.1%
Total numbers	85	100%

4.3.7. Discussion

The scores of all texts vary but if a simple comparison is made; three texts achieve scores with high level of formality and three texts do not. The texts that achieve a high level of formality are: *Our Government – The Legislative Branch*, *Issues – Education*, and *About the White House – History*. Two texts achieve a low level of formality and the texts are: *The Administration – First Lady Michelle Obama* and *Briefing Room – Presidential Actions*. One text has an average level of formality and it is *Blog – Setting the Spending Record Straight*. It is possible that the three texts that have higher scores achieved them because those texts are very informative. For example, *Our Government – The Legislative Branch* informs about how the legislative process works, how bills are accepted or not, and much more. The post from the blog is also rather informative but use of active constructions is favored by the author, perhaps to make it easier to understand.

Conclusion

This essay investigates the degree of readability in language used in the website of the White House. The texts are analyzed using the FOG index and the Flesch Reading Ease formula. The use of nominalizations and passive verb constructions has been investigated as well. After analyzing all six different texts by three different methods it is now time to come to a conclusion and to try and answer the research questions: Are the reading grade levels of the White House website too high? Are the percentage of nominalization and the use of passive constructions above desired levels?

The results from examining the texts with the FOG index, and the Flesch Reading Ease formula shows mixed results. The different formulas do not concur in all texts; they actually differ in all texts but two. According to the formulas the scores are (with the FOG index first and The Flesch Reading Ease formula second, see table 2):

- *Our Government – The Legislative Branch*: 15 and 56.9.
- *Issues – Education*: 17.1 and 35.3.
- *About the White House – History*: 13.7 and 67.9.
- *The Administration – First Lady Michelle Obama*: 12.4 and 54.3.
- *Briefing Room – Presidential Actions*: 20.5 and 30.5.
- *Blog – Setting the Spending Record Straight*: 16.5 and 55.8.

The FOG index tends to have higher results than the Flesch Reading Ease formula; this may depend on the fact that the FOG index uses the number of hard words in its calculation while the Flesch Reading Ease formula uses the number of syllables instead. However, in general, score results from both formulas are quite high. The passage that had the lowest index of them all required an education of at least 8 to 9 years. It is likely that the vocabulary could be at an easier level for better understanding of the public audience. Sentence length is another issue that plays a part in the difficulty of understanding texts. For example; the blog post contained 690 words but had only 24 sentences. Looking at the attained readability scores from both formulas, the readability grade level is high in all texts.

When analyzing the amount of nominalization occurring in the texts, the texts are quite divided once again. Three texts contained a high score of nominalization, and the other three were much under the maximum limit. The texts with high score of nominalization are: *Our Government – The Legislative Branch*, *Issues – Education*, and *Briefing Room – Presidential Actions*. The texts with low scores regarding nominalization are: *About the White House – History*, *The Administration – First Lady Michelle Obama*, and *Blog – Setting the Spending Record Straight*. The three texts that have high scores exceed the limit of three percent,

which is the suggested limit for use of nominalization in a text. It appears that those three texts have a high level of formality, if measured in nominalization. The texts with low scores are regarded as less formal.

If applying the results of Spyridakis and Isakson's study to my results, people would gain more knowledge from the texts containing few nominalizations than those containing many nominalizations. The text *Issues – Education* scored highest in percentage of nominalization with 5.35 (See table 4); perhaps it could be rewritten for better comprehension for everyone.

The analysis of passive construction in texts from the official website of the White House reveals that three texts have a high level of formality and three do not. The texts with high scores regarding use of passive constructions are: *Our Government – The Legislative Branch*, *Issues – Education*, and *About the White House – History*. The texts that have normal or low scores are: *The Administration – First Lady Michelle Obama*, *Briefing Room – Presidential Actions*, and *Blog – Setting the Spending Record Straight*.

If the scores from the different investigations are compared separately, the formality level would not be as high in half of the texts of the website. It is important to remember that scores attained from readability formulas are not set in stone; the grades are more like guidelines when it comes to establishing readability levels. However, if taking in all the different results, analyzing scores from the reading formulas, and considering the percentage of nominalizations and use of passive constructions together, all texts would be graded as difficult to read, and have a quite high formality level. Considering that the lowest level required reading a passage from the White House is 8 to 9 years of education there are many people who would lack the education or knowledge, especially for those texts that require a graduate education. The conclusion is that the language of the website of the White House and its administration is too complex to be fully understood if the reader does not have many years of education or experience. The reading grade levels of most texts are rather high. It is also concluded that the level of formality, when measured in use of nominalization and use of passive construction, is quite high.

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APPENDIX

Texts

The Legislative Branch

Established by Article I of the Constitution, the Legislative Branch consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate, which together form the United States Congress. The Constitution grants Congress the sole authority to enact legislation and declare war, the right to confirm or reject many Presidential appointments, and substantial investigative powers.

The House of Representatives is made up of 435 elected members, divided among the 50 states in proportion to their total population. In addition, there are 6 non-voting members, representing the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and four other territories of the United States. The presiding officer of the chamber is the Speaker of the House, elected by the Representatives. He or she is third in the line of succession to the Presidency.

Members of the House are elected every two years and must be 25 years of age, a U.S. citizen for at least seven years, and a resident of the state (but not necessarily the district) they represent.

The House has several powers assigned exclusively to it, including the power to initiate revenue bills, impeach federal officials, and elect the President in the case of an electoral college tie.

The Senate is composed of 100 Senators, 2 for each state. Until the ratification of the 17th Amendment in 1913, Senators were chosen by state legislatures, not by popular vote. Since then, they have been elected to six-year terms by the people of each state. Senator's terms are staggered so that about one-third of the Senate is up for reelection every two years. Senators must be 30 years of age, U.S. citizens for at least nine years, and residents of the state they represent.

The Vice President of the United States serves as President of the Senate and may cast the decisive vote in the event of a tie in the Senate.

The Senate has the sole power to confirm those of the President's appointments that require consent, and to ratify treaties. There are, however, two exceptions to this rule: the House must also approve appointments to the Vice Presidency and any treaty that involves foreign trade. The Senate also tries impeachment cases for federal officials referred to it by the House.

In order to pass legislation and send it to the President for his signature, both the House and the Senate must pass the same bill by majority vote. If the President vetoes a bill, they may override his veto by passing the bill again in each chamber with at least two-thirds of each body voting in favor.

The Legislative Process

The first step in the legislative process is the introduction of a bill to Congress. Anyone can write it, but only members of Congress can introduce legislation. Some important bills are traditionally introduced at the request of the President, such as the annual federal budget. During the legislative process, however, the initial bill can undergo drastic changes.

After being introduced, a bill is referred to the appropriate committee for review. There are 17 Senate committees, with 70 subcommittees, and 23 House committees, with 104 subcommittees. The committees are not set in stone, but change in number and form with each new Congress as required for the efficient consideration of legislation. Each committee oversees a specific policy area, and the subcommittees take on more specialized policy areas.

For example, the House Committee on Ways and Means includes subcommittees on Social Security and Trade. A bill is first considered in a subcommittee, where it may be accepted, amended, or rejected entirely. If the members of the subcommittee agree to move a bill forward, it is reported to the full committee, where the process is repeated again. Throughout this stage of the process, the committees and subcommittees call hearings to investigate the merits and flaws of the bill. They invite experts, advocates, and opponents to appear before the committee and provide testimony, and can compel people to appear using subpoena power if necessary.

If the full committee votes to approve the bill, it is reported to the floor of the House or Senate, and the majority party leadership decides when to place the bill on the calendar for consideration. If a bill is particularly pressing, it may be considered right away. Others may wait for months or never be scheduled at all.

When the bill comes up for consideration, the House has a very structured debate process. Each member who wishes to speak only has a few minutes, and the number and kind of amendments are usually limited. In the Senate, debate on most bills is unlimited — Senators may speak to issues other than the bill under consideration during their speeches, and any amendment can be introduced. Senators can use this to filibuster bills under consideration, a procedure by which a Senator delays a vote on a bill — and by extension its passage — by refusing to stand down. A supermajority of 60 Senators can break a filibuster by invoking cloture, or the cessation of debate on the bill, and forcing a vote. Once debate is over, the votes of a simple majority passes the bill.

A bill must pass both houses of Congress before it goes to the President for consideration. Though the Constitution requires that the two bills have the exact same wording, this rarely happens in practice. To bring the bills into alignment, a Conference Committee is convened, consisting of members from both chambers. The members of the committee produce a conference report, intended as the final version of the bill. Each chamber

then votes again to approve the conference report. Depending on where the bill originated, the final text is then enrolled by either the Clerk of the House or the Secretary of the Senate, and presented to the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate for their signatures. The bill is then sent to the President.

When receiving a bill from Congress, the President has several options. If the President agrees substantially with the bill, he or she may sign it into law, and the bill is then printed in the Statutes at Large. If the President believes the law to be bad policy, he may veto it and send it back to Congress. Congress may override the veto with a two-thirds vote of each chamber, at which point the bill becomes law and is printed.

There are two other options that the President may exercise. If Congress is in session and the President takes no action within 10 days, the bill becomes law. If Congress adjourns before 10 days are up and the President takes no action, then the bill dies and Congress may not vote to override. This is called a pocket veto, and if Congress still wants to pass the legislation, they must begin the entire process anew.

Powers of Congress

Congress, as one of the three coequal branches of government, is ascribed significant powers by the Constitution. All legislative power in the government is vested in Congress, meaning that it is the only part of the government that can make new laws or change existing laws. Executive Branch agencies issue regulations with the full force of law, but these are only under the authority of laws enacted by Congress. The President may veto bills Congress passes, but Congress may also override a veto by a two-thirds vote in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Article I of the Constitution enumerates the powers of Congress and the specific areas in which it may legislate. Congress is also empowered to enact laws deemed "necessary and proper" for the execution of the powers given to any part of the government under the Constitution.

Part of Congress's exercise of legislative authority is the establishment of an annual budget for the government. To this end, Congress levies taxes and tariffs to provide funding for essential government services. If enough money cannot be raised to fund the government, then Congress may also authorize borrowing to make up the difference. Congress can also mandate spending on specific items: legislatively directed spending, commonly known as "earmarks," specifies funds for a particular project, rather than for a government agency.

Both chambers of Congress have extensive investigative powers, and may compel the production of evidence or testimony toward whatever end they deem necessary. Members of Congress spend much of their time holding hearings and investigations in committee. Refusal to cooperate with a Congressional subpoena can result in charges of contempt of Congress, which could result in a prison term.

The Senate maintains several powers to itself: It ratifies treaties by a two-thirds supermajority vote and confirms the appointments of the President by a majority vote. The consent of the House of Representatives is also necessary for the ratification of trade agreements and the confirmation of the Vice President.

Congress also holds the sole power to declare war.

Government Oversight

Oversight of the executive branch is an important Congressional check on the President's power and a balance against his discretion in implementing laws and making regulations.

A major way that Congress conducts oversight is through hearings. The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs are both devoted to overseeing and reforming government operations, and each committee conducts oversight in its policy area. Congress also maintains an investigative organization, the Government Accountability Office (GAO). Founded in 1921 as the General Accounting Office, its original mission was to audit the budgets and financial statements sent to Congress by the Secretary of the Treasury and the Director of the Office of Management and Budget. Today, the GAO audits and generates reports on every aspect of the government, ensuring that taxpayer dollars are spent with the effectiveness and efficiency that the American people deserve.

The executive branch also polices itself: Sixty-four Inspectors General, each responsible for a different agency, regularly audit and report on the agencies to which they are attached.

Education

Progress

The [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#) invested heavily in education both as a way to provide jobs now and lay the foundation for long-term prosperity.

- The Act includes \$5 billion for early learning programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, and programs for children with special needs.
- The Act also provides \$77 billion for reforms to strengthen elementary and secondary education, including \$48.6 billion to stabilize state education budgets (of which \$8.8 billion may be used for other government services) and to encourage states to:

- Make improvements in teacher effectiveness and ensure that all schools have highly-qualified teachers;
- Make progress toward college and career-ready standards and rigorous assessments that will improve both teaching and learning;
- Improve achievement in low-performing schools, through intensive support and effective interventions; and
- Gather information to improve student learning, teacher performance, and college and career readiness through enhanced data systems.
- The Act provides \$5 billion in competitive funds to spur innovation and chart ambitious reform to close the achievement gap.
- The Act includes over \$30 billion to address college affordability and improve access to higher education.

Guiding Principles

Providing a high-quality education for all children is critical to America's economic future. Our nation's economic competitiveness and the path to the American Dream depend on providing every child with an education that will enable them to succeed in a global economy that is predicated on knowledge and innovation. President Obama is committed to providing every child access to a complete and competitive education, from cradle through career.

Focus on Early Childhood Education

The years before a child reaches kindergarten are among the most critical in his or her life to influence learning. President Obama is committed to providing the support that our youngest children need to prepare to succeed later in school. The President supports a seamless and comprehensive set of services and support for children, from birth through age 5. Because the President is committed to helping all children succeed – regardless of where they spend their day – he will urge states to impose high standards across all publicly funded early learning settings, develop new programs to improve opportunities and outcomes, engage parents in their child's early learning and development, and improve the early education workforce.

Reform and Invest in K-12 Education

President Obama will reform America's public schools to deliver a 21st Century education that will prepare all children for success in the new global workplace. He will foster a race to the top in our nation's schools, by promoting world-class academic standards and a curriculum that fosters critical thinking, problem solving, and the innovative use of knowledge to prepare students for college and career. He will push to end the use of ineffective, "off-the-shelf" tests, and support new, state-of-the-art assessment and accountability systems that provide timely and useful information about the learning and progress of individual students.

Teachers are the single most important resource to a child's learning. President Obama will ensure that teachers are supported as professionals in the classroom, while also holding them more accountable. He will invest in innovative strategies to help teachers to improve student outcomes, and use rewards and incentives to keep talented teachers in the schools that need them the most. President Obama will invest in a national effort to prepare and reward outstanding teachers, while recruiting the best and brightest to the field of teaching. And he will challenge State and school districts to remove ineffective teachers from the classroom.

The President believes that investment in education must be accompanied by reform and innovation. The President supports the expansion of high-quality charter schools. He has challenged States to lift limits that stifle growth among successful charter schools and has encouraged rigorous accountability for all charter schools.

Restore America's Leadership in Higher Education

President Obama is committed to ensuring that America will regain its lost ground and have the highest proportion of students graduating from college in the world by 2020. The President believes that regardless of educational path after high school, all Americans should be prepared to enroll in at least one year of higher education or job training to better prepare our workforce for a 21st century economy.

To accomplish these overarching goals, the President is committed to increasing higher education access and success by restructuring and dramatically expanding college financial aid, while making federal programs simpler, more reliable, and more efficient for students. The President has proposed a plan to address college completion and strengthen the higher education pipeline to ensure that more students succeed and complete their degree. His plan will also invest in community colleges to equip a greater share of young people and adults with high-demand skills and education for emerging industries.

History

White House History

For more than 200 years, the White House has been more than just the home of the Presidents and their families. Throughout the world, it is recognized as the symbol of the President, of the President's administration, and of the United States.

About the Building

For two hundred years, the White House has stood as a symbol of the Presidency, the United States government, and the American people. Its history, and the history of the nation's capital, began when President George Washington signed an Act of Congress in December of 1790 declaring that the federal government would reside in a district "not exceeding ten miles square...on the river Potomac." President Washington, together with city planner Pierre L'Enfant, chose the site for the new residence, which is now 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. As preparations began for the new federal city, a competition was held to find a builder of the "President's House." Nine proposals were submitted, and Irish-born architect James Hoban won a gold medal for his practical and handsome design.

Construction began when the first cornerstone was laid in October of 1792. Although President Washington oversaw the construction of the house, he never lived in it. It was not until 1800, when the White House was nearly completed, that its first residents, President John Adams and his wife, Abigail, moved in. Since that time, each President has made his own changes and additions. The White House is, after all, the President's private home. It is also the only private residence of a head of state that is open to the public, free of charge.

The White House has a unique and fascinating history. It survived a fire at the hands of the British in 1814 (during the war of 1812) and another fire in the West Wing in 1929, while Herbert Hoover was President. Throughout much of Harry S. Truman's presidency, the interior of the house, with the exception of the third floor, was completely gutted and renovated while the Trumans lived at Blair House, right across Pennsylvania Avenue. Nonetheless, the exterior stone walls are those first put in place when the White House was constructed two centuries ago.

Presidents can express their individual style in how they decorate some parts of the house and in how they receive the public during their stay. Thomas Jefferson held the first Inaugural open house in 1805. Many of those who attended the swearing-in ceremony at the U.S. Capitol simply followed him home, where he greeted them in the Blue Room. President Jefferson also opened the house for public tours, and it has remained open, except during wartime, ever since. In addition, he welcomed visitors to annual receptions on New Year's Day and on the Fourth of July. In 1829, a horde of 20,000 Inaugural callers forced President Andrew Jackson to flee to the safety of a hotel while, on the lawn, aides filled washtubs with orange juice and whiskey to lure the mob out of the mud-tracked White House.

After Abraham Lincoln's presidency, Inaugural crowds became far too large for the White House to accommodate them comfortably. However, not until Grover Cleveland's first presidency did this unsafe practice change. He held a presidential review of the troops from a flag-draped grandstand built in front of the White House. This procession evolved into the official Inaugural parade we know today. Receptions on New Year's Day and the Fourth of July continued to be held until the early 1930s.

- There are 132 rooms, 35 bathrooms, and 6 levels in the Residence. There are also 412 doors, 147 windows, 28 fireplaces, 8 staircases, and 3 elevators.
- At various times in history, the White House has been known as the "President's Palace," the "President's House," and the "Executive Mansion." President Theodore Roosevelt officially gave the White House its current name in 1901.
- Presidential Firsts while in office... President James Polk (1845-49) was the first President to have his photograph taken... President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-09) was not only the first President to ride in an automobile, but also the first President to travel outside the country when he visited Panama... President Franklin Roosevelt (1933-45) was the first President to ride in an airplane.
- With five full-time chefs, the White House kitchen is able to serve dinner to as many as 140 guests and hors d'oeuvres to more than 1,000.
- The White House requires 570 gallons of paint to cover its outside surface.
- For recreation, the White House has a variety of facilities available to its residents, including a tennis court, jogging track, swimming pool, movie theater, and bowling lane.

First Lady Michelle Obama

When people ask First Lady Michelle Obama to describe herself, she doesn't hesitate to say that first and foremost, she is Malia and Sasha's mom.

But before she was a mother -- or a wife, lawyer or public servant -- she was Fraser and Marian Robinson's daughter.

The Robinsons lived in a brick bungalow on the South Side of Chicago. Fraser was a pump operator for the Chicago Water Department, and despite being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at a young age, he hardly ever missed a day of work. Marian stayed home to raise Michelle and her older brother Craig, skillfully managing a busy household filled with love, laughter, and important life lessons.

A product of Chicago public schools, Mrs. Obama studied sociology and African-American studies at Princeton University. After graduating from Harvard Law School in 1988, she joined the Chicago law firm Sidley & Austin, where she later met the man who would become the love of her life.

After a few years, Mrs. Obama decided her true calling was working with people to serve their communities and their neighbors. She served as assistant commissioner of planning and development in Chicago's City Hall before becoming the founding executive director of the Chicago chapter of Public Allies, an AmeriCorps program that prepares youth for public service.

In 1996, Mrs. Obama joined the University of Chicago with a vision of bringing campus and community together. As Associate Dean of Student Services, she developed the university's first community service program, and under her leadership as Vice President of Community and External Affairs for the University of Chicago Medical Center, volunteerism skyrocketed.

Promoting Service and working with young people has remained a staple of her career and her interest.

Continuing this effort now as First Lady, Mrs. Obama recently launched the [Let's Move!](#) campaign to bring together community leaders, teachers, doctors, nurses, moms and dads in a nationwide effort to tackle the challenge of childhood obesity. [Let's Move!](#) has an ambitious but important goal: to solve the epidemic of childhood obesity within a generation.

[Let's Move!](#) will give parents the support they need, provide healthier food in schools, help our kids to be more physically active, and make healthy, affordable food available in every part of our country.

As First Lady, Mrs. Obama looks forward to continuing her work on the issues close to her heart — supporting military families, helping working women balance career and family, encouraging national service, promoting the arts and arts education, and fostering healthy eating and healthy living for children and families across the country. Michelle and Barack Obama have two daughters: Malia, 12, and Sasha, 9. Like their mother, the girls were born on the South Side of Chicago.

The White House
Office of the Press Secretary
For Immediate Release
November 15, 2010

Presidential Proclamation--National Entrepreneurship Week

**BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
A PROCLAMATION**

Entrepreneurs embody the promise that lies at the heart of America -- that if you have a good idea and work hard enough, the American dream is within your reach. During National Entrepreneurship Week, we renew our commitment to supporting the entrepreneurs who power the engine of our Nation's economy. These intrepid individuals translate their vision into products and services that keep America strong and competitive on a global scale, and build opportunity and prosperity across our country.

As we emerge from a historic economic recession, my Administration has taken decisive action to accelerate growth and remove barriers for entrepreneurs and small business owners to grow, hire, and prosper. At a time when small business lending standards had tightened considerably, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act helped the Small Business Administration (SBA) work with lenders to provide critical SBA loans. These loans assisted thousands of entrepreneurs in starting new businesses, employing workers, and jumpstarting our economy. I was also proud to sign the Small Business Jobs Act of 2010, the most important investment in small businesses in more than a decade. This legislation will make it easier for them to expand and hire, creating tax breaks and accelerating more than \$55 billion in tax relief for entrepreneurs and small business owners by the end of 2011.

To harness the ingenuity of the American people, my Administration has developed a national innovation strategy, which emphasizes entrepreneurship as a catalyst for new industries, new businesses, and new jobs. This strategy focuses on key investments to foster American innovation, improving education, building a 21st-century infrastructure, and bolstering our ability to conduct cutting-edge research. It also seeks to promote and facilitate competitive markets for entrepreneurs, and to support breakthroughs in areas of national priority -- including alternative energy, health care technology, and advanced vehicle technologies. In addition, the new National Advisory Council on Innovation and Entrepreneurship is collecting input from across the United States to recommend policies that will bolster our economic growth and lead to sustainable, well-paying American jobs. I encourage aspiring entrepreneurs and other Americans interested in promoting innovation to visit www.SBA.gov for resources and information.

All Americans can play a role in increasing the prevalence and success of new start-ups. Business leaders can mentor a budding entrepreneur who has an original idea and the will to execute, but could benefit from the guidance of an experienced owner or operator. Philanthropists can expand entrepreneurship education for ambitious students at underserved schools and community colleges. Universities can accelerate the transition of scientific breakthroughs from the lab to the marketplace. Together, we can help millions of entrepreneurs create the industries and jobs of the 21st century and solve some of the toughest challenges we face as a Nation.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim November 14 through November 20, 2010, as National Entrepreneurship Week. I call upon all Americans to commemorate this week with appropriate programs and activities, and to celebrate November 19, 2010, as National Entrepreneurs' Day. IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this fifteenth day of November, in the year of our Lord two thousand ten, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-fifth.

BARACK OBAMA

[The White House Blog](#)

Setting the Spending Record Straight

Posted by Kenneth Baer on October 12, 2010 at 05:40 PM EST

The Wall Street Journal today ran an [editorial](#) bemoaning the increase in federal spending between FY 2008 and FY 2010.

What it doesn't factor in, or provide context for, is the chain of events that led to these increases.

First, a large driver of federal spending was the onset of the economic collapse in late 2008 as automatic aid to people hit hard by the downturn, such as unemployment insurance and food stamps, kicked in. With more people temporarily eligible for these mandatory programs and less revenue coming in, the deficit increased substantially in FY 2009, which began on October 1, 2008. In fact, on January 7, 2009 -- before President Obama was sworn in -- the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) issued its [Economic and Budget Outlook for Fiscal Years 2009-2019](#). In that document, CBO projected that government spending would rise from 20.9 percent of GDP in FY 2008 to 24.9 percent of GDP in FY 2009. In reality, government spending in FY 2009 turned out to be roughly what had been predicted a year earlier (24.7 percent). That is to say, this big increase of government spending occurred because of the economic meltdown the Administration inherited and the accompanying automatic increase in programs that assist those most hurt by it -- and this was already fully baked into the fiscal cake when the President took office.

Second, also in response to the recession, we needed to help close the huge gap between what the economy could produce and what it was producing in order to prevent a second Great Depression and even more devastating job losses. That's why economists from across the spectrum supported a significant stimulus measure, and why the President signed into law the Recovery Act.

While the Recovery Act has become a subject of intense debate, it clearly has brought our economy back from the brink. Instead of four quarters of economic contraction, we now have had four quarters of economic growth. Instead of losing 750,000 jobs a month, we've now had nine months of private sector job growth. Recovery Act investments not only saved the jobs of thousands of teachers, firefighters, and police officers, but are also laying the foundation for economic growth in years to come as new roads, bridges, power plants, and rail are built. The Recovery Act added to government spending, but it was essential and beneficial to the nation's economy. While measures like these were needed to stave off recession and strengthen the economy, we also must restore fiscal sustainability over the medium- and long-term. However, doing so is made much more difficult because of past fiscal irresponsibility -- the previous Administration's failure to pay for two large tax cuts and the Medicare prescription drug benefit.

What is required of us now is to make the tough choices to put our fiscal house in order.

The President has put forward a budget that contains more than \$1 trillion in deficit reduction. He has put in place a three-year freeze on non-security discretionary spending -- in nominal terms based on levels that do not include any Recovery Act funding -- and vowed to enforce it with his veto pen. He convened a bipartisan fiscal commission to devise a plan to get our budget in primary balance and our country on a long-term, sustainable course, and looks forward to hearing back from them in December. Looking to the long term where the growth of health care costs is the single biggest driver of increased spending, the President signed into law the Affordable Care Act, which will reduce the deficit by more than \$100 billion in its first decade and more than \$1 trillion in the second.

The other side's response to our fiscal imbalance is to make it worse by supporting tax cuts for the wealthiest 2 percent of households -- cuts that will increase our deficits by nearly \$700 billion and do nothing at all to stimulate [economic growth](#).

What should worry those concerned about government spending and our fiscal situation are not slanted arguments about how we got here, but plans like these that will put us deeper into a hole.

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