



The best and worst asset manager websites for clarity

Study praises Federated Hermes, Barclays, but finds average asset manager website harder to read than an academic paper

[Ben Strack](#) September 3, 2020, 4:53 pm

Barclays Wealth Management and **Federated Hermes** are the only asset managers that communicate at a reading level understood by the average consumer, new research shows.

Published by **VisibleThread**, the *2020 Asset Management Clarity Report* analyzed 60 of the largest asset management firms by reviewing more than 5,800 web pages.

The average North American consumer reads at an eighth-grade level. Though many firms argue that their audience is sophisticated and can understand complex content, studies show the more knowledgeable someone is, the less tolerant they are of jargon, the report argues.

“Highly educated people prefer simpler language that allows them to rapidly understand a message,” it states. “Added complexity breeds mistrust irrespective of education levels.”

Italy-based **Eurizon Capital** was the worst in this category, communicating at what the report deemed to be a grade level of 20. **Manulife Investment Management** and **Wellington Management** also struggled to keep their content simple, publishing content at the levels of grade 16 and 17, respectively, according to the study.

Barclays also led fund groups in the overall readability category, which is based on the Flesch Reading Ease Test. The method determines a readability score – from 0 to 100 – based on the average length of sentences and the average number of syllables per word, with higher numbers representing text that is easier to read.

The wealth manager posted a score of 61, below **J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*** (73), but ahead of **Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*** (58).

representing a grade 9 reading level.

While some firms quickly wrote content and spoke to journalists in March about Covid-19's impact on markets and their portfolios and what they were doing about it, Sondhelm explained, some others said there was nothing to add.

"That misses the point," he contended. "Asset managers need to show their clients they are paying attention and willing to share their thoughts for clients, prospects and journalists."

[MARKETING STRATEGY](#) ☆

[BARCLAYS WEALTH MANAGEMENT](#)

[BLACKROCK](#)

[EURIZON CAPITAL](#)

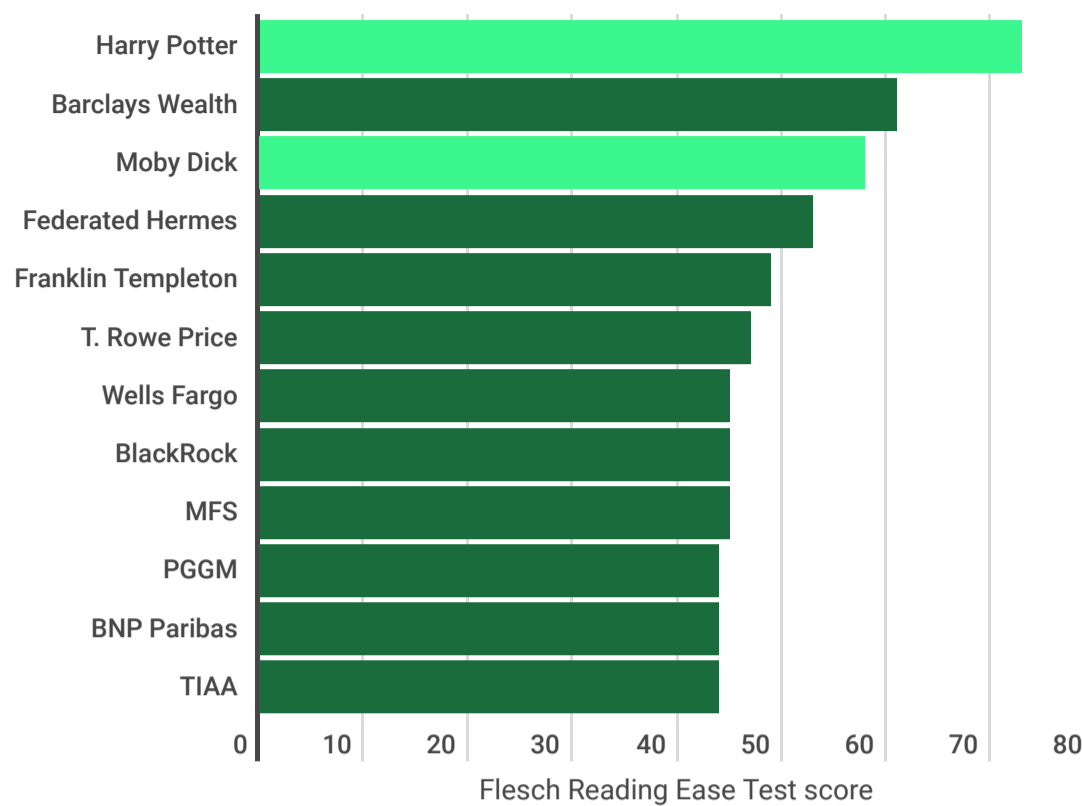
[FEDERATED HERMES](#)

[MANULIFE ASSET MANAGEMENT](#)

[PGGM](#)

[WELLINGTON MANAGEMENT](#)

Top 10 Asset Managers - Readability



Source: VisibleThread's 2020 Asset Management Clarity Report



The average readability of asset management websites clocked in at 36 – worse than an academic paper on chess (40), but better than *Harvard Law Review* (30).

Notably, **BlackRock** improved the most year over year, ranking last [in the 2019 report](#) with a readability score of 12. The world's largest asset manager notched a score of 45 in the latest report, tied for fifth-best.

Federated's readability ranked 48th in 2018 and was last year's biggest improver, jumping up to second, the report notes. The firm remained in that position in 2020 due to Federated's focus on simplicity during a recent revamp.

"Our guiding principle for the launch of our website last year was clarity, whether that means plain everyday language, flattened taxonomy or a user having easier access to a fact sheet," a spokesperson said.

The company deploys what it calls a "bites, snacks and meals approach" to its online insights. It makes sure to offer users an engaging headline, brief details about a longer piece –such as a CIO market update–and easy access to the entire article.

"The approach has served us well through the Covid-19 pandemic, as we heard positive feedback from our clients about the clarity and timeliness of our Insights content," the representative added.

Resonating with a target audience is crucial for asset managers, explained **Dan Sondhelm**, CEO of financial marketing firm **Sondhelm Partners**, adding that readers likely won't return to a website filled with jargon.

"Investors want to trust their portfolio managers, but you can't just say, 'Trust us,'" he told *Fund Intelligence*. "Because you use a lot of five-syllable words on your website, you are smart, but there are many smart asset managers. Investors need to understand what you are saying as well to be trusted."

The VisibleThread report also measured the percentage of long sentences, complex word density and the percentage of sentences using passive voice.

The 60 asset managers used long sentences nearly 26% of the time, about five times higher than the recommended level. Only four of the 60 companies tallied the recommended complex word density or lower – up from just one last year – and the firms used passive voice about three times more than they should, the report noted.

Interestingly, Eurizon, which ranked worst in readability and grade level, had the best complex word density and the lowest percentage of sentences in passive voice.

PGGM, a pension fund service provider, was the clearest asset manager when considering all categories, the study found, improving from 12th in 2019. Wellington, not featured on last year's report, fared the worst.

Top 10 (Most Clear) Asset Managers

Rank	Firm	Readability score (rank)	Passive	Long	Complex
1	PGGM	44 (8)	4.1% (4)	12.4% (2)	1.1% (7)
2	Federated Hermes	53 (2)	4.4% (7)	14.1% (3)	1.8% (15)
3	Barclays Wealth Management	61 (1)	8.1% (16)	18.5% (14)	1.9% (20)
4	CDPQ	41 (15)	4.1% (5)	20.5% (20)	1.3% (9)
5	Wells Fargo	45 (5)	7.9% (14)	16.6% (9)	2.1% (29)
6	BNP Paribas Asset Management	44 (8)	4.4% (8)	24.5% (32)	0.9% (4)
7	T. Rowe Price	47 (4)	8.6% (19)	21.7% (22)	1.9% (22)
8	MEAG	29 (50)	3.3% (3)	14.9% (4)	0.9% (3)
9	Swiss Life Asset Managers	30 (49)	2.2% (2)	15.6% (5)	1% (5)
10	Putnam Investments	41 (15)	9.2% (22)	19.7% (18)	2% (24)

Source: VisibleThread's 2020 Asset Management Clarity Report

Bottom 10 (Least Clear) Asset Managers

Rank	Firm	Readability score (rank)	Passive	Long	Complex
51	M&G Investments	34 (44)	13.5% (40)	30.5% (45)	3% (52)
52	Principal Global Investors	26 (52)	9.2% (23)	23.1% (26)	7.6% (60)
53	Macquarie Asset Management	32 (47)	12.5% (36)	28.7% (39)	2.7% (41)
54	Santander Asset Management	23 (55)	12.6% (37)	38.2% (56)	1.8% (16)
55	Dimensional Fund Advisors	31 (48)	14.4% (44)	31.4% (49)	2.4% (32)
56	Baillie Gifford & Co.	35 (40)	23.9% (58)	29.2% (40)	3.3% (55)
57	AMG	26 (52)	15% (48)	37.3% (55)	2.5% (37)
58	Manulife Investment Management	14 (59)	51.9% (60)	45% (59)	1.9% (19)
59	Nomura Asset Management	25 (54)	22.1% (57)	38.7% (57)	2.7% (43)
60	Wellington Management	21 (58)	31.5% (59)	63.9% (60)	2.8% (45)

Source: VisibleThread's 2020 Asset Management Clarity Report



Sondhelm noted that some asset managers are very serious about every word, each thought leadership piece, and even every color on their sites. But others, he noted, build websites or write quarterly commentaries as a way to “check off a box,” and don’t pay attention to how the content is being absorbed by clients and prospects.

“I believe those asset managers who pay attention to their communications, with all things equal, will win,” Sondhelm said. “And for asset managers who now strengthen their communications, assuming their overall story is good, has a likelihood of being one of the new winners that will come out of [the pandemic].”

Communicating amid a crisis

Since the coronavirus outbreak began rattling markets in the US in March, investors have felt a heightened sense of worry about their financial futures.

Organizations praised for their communication during the pandemic have acted thoughtfully and quickly, showed an understanding of customers’ concerns and were clear in their messaging, the VisibleThread report notes.

More than a third of the firms offered extended text directly relating to the actions the firms were taking, and about the same number linked from their homepage to external content about market factors. But 30% of firms’ websites made no mention of Covid-19, according to the study.

“Some of these firms may have sent letters or emails to investors; they might have engaged on social media,” the report states. “While all channels are valid, most investors will expect to find regularly updated information available on websites.”

Of the nine firms that had leaders publish executive letters on their websites, none communicated at an eighth-grade reading level or lower. But letters by **Fidelity Investments** and **Putnam Investments** came closest of the pack, each garnering a readability score of 52,