



TOP U.S.
**GOVERNMENT
CONTRACTORS**
WEBSITE CLARITY INDEX

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The VisibleThread Website Index, Top Government Contractors 2016 - Executive Summary

Executive Summary

There is a growing global movement for all website content to be clear, concise and relevant. For example, in the US, the [Plain Language Act of 2010](#) requires all US Federal agencies to communicate clearly. In the UK, the government's [Digital Service](#), issued its mandatory [content design: planning, writing and managing content guidelines](#). In Australia, the [Office of Parliamentary Counsel](#) has similar goals as does the [Government of Canada](#).

In February 2017, as a part of our ongoing research program into the use of clear language in Internet communications, VisibleThread measured the largest US Federal Government Contractor websites for Clarity.

Why is clear writing important for Federal Contractors?

1. **Meet government clear language expectations:** The US Federal Government expects contractors to answer RFPs using clear and concise language. Similarly, if your web site copy is obtuse or complex, it reflects poorly on your brand. It creates a subliminal impression that you will be hard to deal with when working with government agencies.
2. **Improve engagement and compliance:** when more people understand what you offer, they are more likely to engage. Similarly, if they clearly understand what you want them to do they are more likely to do it. And contractors, just like any brand need to clearly articulate value and service / product differentiation.

The analysis measured up to 100 pages on each website, across these four dimensions:

- [Readability](#) – How readable is the content?
- [Passive Language](#) – Active Language communicates clearly. What proportion of sentences are passive?
- [Long Sentences](#) – What proportion of all sentences are too long?
- [Word Complexity Density](#) – Density rating is the proportion of complex words relative to total word count)

The VisibleThread Website Index, Top Government Contractors – 2016



Our analysis found that the top five Government Contractor firms were:

1. [CDW-G](#)
2. [Dell Inc](#)
3. [AT&T Inc](#)
4. [Microsoft Corp](#)
5. [Engility](#)

VisibleThread™ Web Index		Top Government Contractors 2016										Num	
		Num	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complexity		Num
		Pages	Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Words	
1	CDW G	100	20	54	2	4%	16	7%	2	2.5	60	47834	
2	Dell Inc	102	20.75	48	6	4%	14	14%	5	2.44	58	58912	
3	AT&T Inc	101	24.75	49	5	5%	22	9%	3	2.66	69	53297	
4	Microsoft Corp	100	25.25	47	7	3%	9	17%	12	2.7	73	53608	
5	Engility	17	26.5	43	9	1%	2	3%	1	4.74	94	1199	

While the bottom firms were:

92. [Battelle](#)
93. [Intuitive Research and Technology Corp](#)
94. [Development Alternatives Inc](#)
95. [SRI International](#)
96. [General Atomics Technologies Corp](#)

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		Pages	Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Words	
92	Battelle	101	68.25	21	88	9%	78	27%	56	2.34	51	31748	
93	Intuitive Research and Technology Corp	100	69	26	70	13%	93	34%	89	1.71	24	33598	
94	Development Alternatives Inc	100	72.25	21	88	5%	28	34%	88	3.18	85	20902	
95	SRI International	100	73	21	88	8%	66	30%	79	2.47	59	32039	
96	General Atomics Technologies Corp	100	73.25	19	93	11%	88	32%	82	1.81	30	31486	

Key Findings

Average Scores for Clear Language

These definitions will help you understand the information we present in the Key Findings section, but you can find detailed definitions of ranking criteria in the Methodology section:

- **Readability** = **31.56** (60 or higher is the ideal target, approx. an 8th grade reading level)
- **Passive language** = **7%** (4% or less is the target)
- **Long Sentences** = **25%** (5% or less across all content is the target)
- **Word Complexity Density** = **2.29** (density rating is the proportion of complex words relative to total word count)

Tech Visionaries and Tech Laggards

[CDW-G](#) topped the 2017 rankings. It scored well in two out of the four categories; Readability at 54/100 (rank 2) and Long Sentences at 7% (rank 2). However, it ranked poorly in overall complexity (rank 60) due largely to the amount of jargon present. As CDW-G is essentially a catalog site, and has less long form content, we would expect it to score well.

Notable mention goes to [STG Inc](#) which ranked joint 24th overall. While not one of the top sites across all four dimensions, it was the only website we analyzed which met VisibleThread's target readability score of 60 or greater, ranking no 1. However, long sentences and complex terminology brought down its overall ranking.

The [General Atomics Technologies](#) website fell well below VisibleThread's target scores in all categories but one (Complexity). Shockingly, 32% of all sentences contained more than 20 words. It was also near the bottom for overall readability (19 out of 100) and its use of passive voice (11%). These factors combined to make it the poorest performing website in our study.

Similarly, [SRI International](#) fared poorly in its use of long sentences. 30% of the sentences on the site contained more than 20 words. Only a slightly below average score on complexity (2.47) ensured that it did not hit the very bottom.

The clear writing index shows a wide spread of overall scores ranging from 20 (good) to 73.25 (poor). This indicates a lack of consistency in adopting and implementing clear writing guidelines. On the other hand, looking at our top performers shows what can be achieved. Even when the subject matter may be highly technical.

Of the 95 firms analyzed, only one (STG) managed to achieve a target readability score of 60 or higher. Three others did come close. This reinforces the perception that the top Government Contractors largely ignore clear writing practices.

Leaders and losers by category

Readability:

Only one out of the 95 top Government Contractors achieved a target readability index score of 60 or higher (1.2%). [STG Inc](#) scored an excellent 73, while [CDW-G](#), [LMI](#) and [Verizon Communication Group](#) scored 54, 52 and 50, respectively.

Passive language:

Thirteen of the websites analyzed met the target Passive Language score of 4%.

Notably, STG Inc wrote their entire website copy using active voice, an impressive achievement. [Engility](#), [Honeywell International](#) and Wyle only wrote 1% of its content using passive voice.

On the other end of the spectrum, [Vencore](#) and [BAE Systems](#) came bottom, both containing 14% passive voice.

Long sentences:

Engility was the only company to beat the target score of 5%, coming in at 3%. CDW G, the next in line managed 7%. The remaining sites ranged between 9% and a whopping 51%.

The website with the highest percentage of long sentences was STG Inc. In fact, over 50% of its website content comprised sentences with more than 20 words, with an average sentence length of 47 words. Despite topping the rankings for readability and passive voice, the extremely high concentration of long sentences dragged it down the overall rankings.

Complex Language:

[Unisys Corp](#) and BAE Systems came first (0.03) and second (0.41) for complex language. Their websites consistently used simpler and more accessible terminology throughout. Wyle and Honeywell International brought up the rear in this category by a clear margin (6.53 and 6.06 respectively).

Room for Improvement: The worst performing Government Contractor websites were [Battelle](#), [Intuitive Research and Technology Corp](#), [Development Alternatives Inc](#), [SRI International](#) and [General Atomics Technologies](#) in last place.

Factors making these the worst performers were:

- low levels of readability (between 26 and 19)
- high proportion of long sentences (between 27% and 34%);
- high degrees of complex language (density between 1.71 and 3.18);
- high levels of passive voice (between 5% and 11%).

Editors should review copy like this extract from the General Atomics site:

“Nirvana can be used to federate geographically distributed high-performance computing centers, enabling designers and researchers to share design and simulation data across organizational divisions, geography, even with other companies joined in collaborative initiatives.”¹

Clarity Characteristics:

- 1 Long sentence,
- 33 total words,
- 1 passive construct (flagged with maroon background)
- Grade level 27

We can simplify this to:

“You can use Nirvana to federate geographically distributed high-performance computing centers.

Designers and researchers can share design and simulation data across organizational divisions, geography, and even with other companies.”

with these improved clarity characteristics.

- a. 2 shorter sentences,
- b. 29 total words (down from 33),
- c. No passive construct (down from 1)
- d. Grade level 16 for sentence 1 (down from 27)
- e. Grade level 18 for sentence 2 (down from 27)

Here’s another example from the same site:

Nirvana is designed to address document management challenges by presenting all the data in the enterprise in one seamless and uniform access point

Aside from the passive construct which we should replace with ‘We designed...’, this also features the clichéd ‘seamless’.

That does nothing to communicate value or uniqueness, and is overused. If there is value, bring it out with evidence. Marketers need to explain what characteristics make it seamless, or drop the claim altogether. Similar arguments hold for other trite language like; best of breed, world class and similar overused clichés.

¹ This sentence appeared on the General Atomics Technologies Corp website at this URL: <http://www.ga.com/systems-engineering-approach-for-algae-production>

Takeaways

1. Wide variability between best and worst performers

There is very wide variability between the best and lowest scoring websites. This applies across all metrics. Editors are forcing readers to needlessly expend high levels of mental energy to understand their message.

For example, readability ranges from 73 (out of 100) for 1st place STG Inc in contrast to a lowly 16 (out of 100) for Vencore.

This implies that someone reading the Vencore website would need a considerably high level of education (equivalent to several advanced degrees) to easily understand the content, while STG is accessible to a high schooler.

But the more important takeaway is that Vencore and the other complex sites are needlessly placing a high cognitive burden on the reader. Marketers need to promote a clear message. So, complex messaging, even for a technological oriented audience leads to churn and poor online engagement.

As one reviewer of this study noted:

“I may have a PhD, but that doesn’t mean I’m happy to wade through complex or cliché laden copy to figure out what they’re saying.”

2. Government Contractors can dramatically improve clarity by focusing on a few key areas

Many websites scored well in certain areas and poorly in others. For instance, [SAIC](#) (Science Applications International Corp) ranks 42nd overall. However, it ranks a much higher 19th on complex language but very poorly (64th) on its use of passive voice. Rapid improvement to the website is possible by paying a little extra attention to the relevant key metrics.

3. Your Website reflects your brand values, even with highly technical content, simple tweaks can make a difference

Brands and marketing teams want to reflect an approachable ethos. Technology companies must use technical language when describing products, processes and services.

But sites like [STG Inc](#) show how improvement is possible along certain dimensions, in their case with low levels of passive voice. Also avoid overused clichés and replace with claims that you can substantiate. It drives deeper brand trust.

The VisibleThread Website Index, Top Government Contractors – 2016



Detailed Results Table

We show the full detailed table below.

Color-coding helps us to understand sites where one or two specific scores may be dragging down the overall ranking. Flagging specific areas (for instance, passive language) pinpoints areas for improvement.

KEY: **Green** = On or near target, **Amber** = Some work needed, **Red** = Well below target level



Top Government Contractors 2016

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1	CDW G	https://www.cdwg.com/	100	20	54	2	4%	16	7%	2	2.5	60	47834	
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3	AT&T Inc	https://www.att.com/	101	24.75	49	5	5%	22	9%	3	2.66	69	53297	
4	Microsoft Corp	https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/	100	25.25	47	7	3%	9	17%	12	2.7	73	53608	
5	Engility	http://engility.com/	17	26.5	43	9	1%	2	3%	1	4.74	94	1199	
6	Westat Inc	https://www.westat.com/	100	26.75	36	22	5%	32	18%	15	1.89	38	22612	
7	Verizon Communications Inc	http://www.verizon.com/about/	101	28.25	50	4	4%	21	15%	8	2.93	80	52809	
8	Accenture	https://www.accenture.com/us-en	100	29.75	39	17	3%	7	13%	4	3.6	91	91458	
9	United Technologies Corp	http://www.utc.com/Pages/Home.aspx	100	30.25	37	21	5%	25	17%	13	2.51	62	37174	
10	MicroTech	http://www.microtech.net/	100	30.5	43	9	4%	13	17%	10	3.59	90	31345	
11	CenturyLink	http://www.centurylink.com/	100	31	43	9	8%	73	15%	7	1.85	35	117900	
12	KPMG LLP	https://home.kpmg.com/us/en/home.html	101	31.75	35	25	7%	53	22%	26	1.68	23	32423	
13	Four Inc	http://fourinc.com/	35	32.25	32	33	5%	23	19%	16	2.39	57	6826	

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14	LMI	http://www.lmi.org/en/Home	89	32.25	52	3	2%	6	25%	46	2.73	74	35242
15	HP Enterprise	https://www.hpe.com/us/en/home.html	102	33	31	40	2%	5	14%	6	2.97	81	64393
16	Orbital ATK Inc	https://www.orbitalatk.com/	100	33.5	36	22	6%	36	29%	68	1.21	8	30911
17	IBM Corp	http://www.ibm.com/us-en/	100	33.75	40	15	4%	15	20%	18	3.26	87	39981
18	Boeing Co	http://www.boeing.com/	101	34.25	40	15	6%	39	23%	37	2.18	46	60326
19	Sterling Computers Corp	http://www.sterlingcomputers.com/	68	34.5	33	32	7%	57	21%	21	1.76	28	20684
20	PricewaterhouseCoopers	http://www.pwc.com/	100	34.5	41	12	6%	38	26%	51	1.87	37	39305
21	Digital Management Inc	https://dminc.com/	100	35.25	45	8	7%	56	27%	55	1.67	22	39175
22	Deloitte	http://www2.deloitte.com/us/en.html	100	35.25	34	27	5%	24	29%	70	1.66	20	54763
23	CGI Group	https://www.cgi.com/en	100	35.75	34	27	5%	27	24%	42	2.24	47	38489
24	Arctic Slope Regional Corp	https://www.asrc.com/Pages/default.aspx	52	37	41	12	12%	92	23%	34	1.39	10	22202
25	STG Inc	http://www.stginc.com/	100	37	73	1	0%	1	51%	96	2.31	50	563588
26	Raytheon Co	http://www.raytheon.com	100	38	38	18	6%	40	24%	41	2.36	53	44628
27	Rockwell Collins	https://www.rockwellcollins.com/	100	38.5	32	33	6%	47	24%	39	1.85	35	28401
28	L3 Communciations	http://www.l-3com.com/	100	39.75	31	40	11%	89	18%	14	1.55	16	36637
29	Carahsoft Technology Corp	http://www.carahsoft.com/	100	40.75	30	46	3%	10	22%	28	2.92	79	75121
30	ImmixGroup Inc	http://www.immixgroup.com/	100	41.5	30	46	4%	12	22%	25	3.01	83	24862
31	Bechtel Group Inc	http://www.bechtel.com/	100	42	34	27	5%	31	24%	38	2.68	72	45749
32	Alion Science & Technogy	http://www.alionscience.com/	100	42.75	29	52	7%	55	20%	19	2.17	45	20669
33	Iron Bow Technologies	https://www.ironbow.com/	101	42.75	27	66	4%	17	21%	22	2.62	66	24391
34	GE	http://www.ge.com/	100	43.25	34	27	6%	50	23%	32	2.61	64	70671
35	Cubic Corp	http://www.cubic.com/	101	43.5	31	40	6%	52	28%	64	1.59	18	27332
36	Mythics Inc	http://www.mythics.com/	100	43.5	30	46	3%	8	22%	31	3.43	89	36575
37	Affigent LLC	http://www.affigent.com/	100	43.75	31	40	11%	87	16%	9	1.9	39	13261
38	World Wide Technology Inc	https://www2.wwt.com/	102	44.5	32	33	6%	35	31%	81	1.8	29	42891
39	AECOM	http://www.aecom.com/	100	44.75	34	27	7%	65	28%	63	1.71	24	29584
40	BAE Systems	http://www.baesystems.com/en/home?r=US	100	45.25	38	18	14%	95	29%	66	0.41	2	23711
41	Unisys Corp	http://www.unisys.com/	101	46	38	18	12%	90	30%	75	0.03	1	12851
42	Science Applications International Corp	http://www.saic.com/	100	46.25	30	46	7%	64	27%	56	1.6	19	75642

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43	Vectrus Systems Corp	https://vectrus.com/	100	46.5	32	33	8%	67	19%	17	2.66	69	58762
44	Thundercat Technology LLC	http://www.thundercattech.com/	100	47	32	33	7%	61	22%	27	2.64	67	32626
45	Wyle	http://www.wyle.com/	4	48.25	23	83	1%	3	17%	11	6.53	96	827
46	CH2M Hill Inc	http://www.ch2m.com/	100	48.75	36	22	10%	81	32%	82	1.39	10	51014
47	Lockheed Martin	http://www.lockheedmartin.com/	101	49	30	46	8%	70	29%	73	1.19	7	44447
48	Maximus Inc	http://www.maximus.com/	100	49	28	58	6%	46	26%	49	2.03	43	27788
49	Serco Group	https://www.serco.com/	101	49.25	41	12	10%	84	43%	95	1.11	6	33026
50	American Systems Corp	http://www.americansystems.com/	65	49.25	29	52	6%	37	23%	33	2.78	75	25220
51	Kelly Services Inc	http://www.kellyservices.com/Global/Home/	96	50	35	25	9%	76	32%	84	1.48	15	17213
52	Jacobs Engineering	http://www.jacobs.com/	58	50.5	32	33	7%	58	30%	77	1.84	34	71203
53	Aerospace Corp	http://www.aerospace.org/	100	50.75	32	33	12%	91	30%	76	0.67	3	26781
54	CACI International	http://www.caci.com/	100	50.75	28	58	6%	51	31%	80	1.44	14	29962
55	ICF International Inc	http://www.icfi.com/	100	51.25	29	52	7%	63	26%	48	1.96	42	43623
56	Cisco Systems Inc	http://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/index.html	101	51.5	28	58	4%	11	25%	45	3.84	92	60818
57	Actionet Inc	http://www.actionet.com/	100	51.75	30	46	9%	80	22%	28	2.36	53	21472
58	Northrop Grumman Corp	http://www.northropgrumman.com/Pages/default.aspx	100	52	29	52	9%	79	28%	65	1.41	12	25772
59	ECS Federal	http://www.ecs-federal.com/	47	52.25	28	58	5%	29	23%	36	3.2	86	21339
60	Trax International Corp	https://www.traxintl.com/	12	53	26	70	5%	30	22%	30	3	82	3737
61	General Dynamics Corp	http://gd.com/	101	53.25	31	40	8%	74	29%	67	1.82	32	35611
62	Noblis Inc	http://www.noblis.org/	100	53.25	28	58	7%	59	29%	72	1.71	24	35071
63	PAE	https://www.pae.com/	100	53.5	31	40	9%	77	36%	93	0.99	4	41210
64	DynCorp International	http://www.dyn-intl.com/	100	53.75	27	66	6%	41	22%	24	3.02	84	53130
65	DLT Solutions	http://www.dlt.com/	100	54.25	25	75	4%	19	27%	59	2.61	64	32098
66	Keypoint Government Solutions	http://www.keypoint.us.com/	24	54.75	24	78	6%	42	26%	47	2.35	52	4879
67	Harris Corp	http://harris.com/	100	55.25	25	75	6%	45	27%	60	1.93	41	24699
68	Parsons Corp	https://www.parsons.com/Pages/default.aspx	100	55.25	27	66	6%	42	23%	35	2.87	78	44586
69	Chemonics International Inc	http://www.chemonics.com/Pages/Home.aspx	100	56.25	29	52	5%	26	34%	91	2.38	56	36263
70	Torch Technologies Inc	http://www.torchtechnologies.com/	100	56.75	25	75	10%	81	24%	44	1.72	27	37697
71	Scientific Research Corp	http://www.scires.com/	100	58.75	24	78	8%	69	21%	20	2.65	68	20470

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72	Honeywell International	http://www.honeywell.com/	100	58.75	24	78	1%	4	27%	58	6.06	95	69892
73	John Snow Inc	http://www.jsi.com/JSIInternet/index.cfm	100	59	28	58	8%	68	34%	90	1.66	20	72745
74	Salient CRGT Inc	http://www.salientcrgt.com/	100	59.25	22	86	5%	32	26%	50	2.66	69	35417
75	Abt Associates	http://www.abtassociates.com/	102	59.5	24	78	7%	62	32%	85	1.42	13	46355
76	Sierra Nevada Corp	http://www.sncorp.com/	100	60.5	28	58	7%	60	29%	71	2.36	53	33504
77	CSRA	http://csra.com/	100	60.5	26	70	7%	54	29%	74	2.11	44	36303
78	NCI Inc	http://www.nciinc.com/	100	60.75	21	88	8%	72	26%	53	1.81	30	39733
79	Red River Computer Co	http://www.redriver.com/	100	61	28	58	10%	83	33%	86	1.56	17	37416
80	Alvarez & Associates LLC	https://www.alvarezassociates.com/	48	61.5	29	52	11%	85	29%	69	1.91	40	12380
81	DRS Technologies Inc	http://www.drs.com/	100	61.75	27	66	11%	85	33%	87	1.29	9	104675
82	Tetra Tech Inc	http://www.tetrattech.com/en	100	62	18	94	4%	18	28%	61	2.78	75	23525
83	Fluor Corp	http://www.fluor.com/pages/default.aspx	100	63.25	20	92	4%	19	26%	54	3.31	88	17949
84	SGT Inc	http://www.sgt-inc.com/	100	63.5	26	70	8%	75	28%	62	2.24	47	30163
85	AASKI Technology Inc	http://www.aaski.com/	100	63.75	24	78	8%	71	24%	43	2.58	63	24137
86	RTI International	https://www.rti.org/	101	63.75	23	83	6%	48	36%	92	1.82	32	24382
87	ManTech International	http://mantech.com/Pages/Home.aspx	100	63.75	18	94	6%	44	24%	40	2.8	77	40506
88	Chenega Corp	http://www.chenega.com/	15	65.5	22	86	5%	32	26%	51	4.25	93	3731
89	Indyne Inc	http://www.indyneinc.com/corporate/	100	65.75	26	70	13%	94	38%	94	1.02	5	63772
90	Vencore	http://www.vencore.com/	2	66	16	96	14%	96	21%	23	2.29	49	403
91	Battelle	http://www.battelle.org/	101	68.25	21	88	9%	78	27%	56	2.34	51	31748
92	Intuitive Research and Technology Corp	http://www.irtc-hq.com/	100	69	26	70	13%	93	34%	89	1.71	24	33598
93	Development Alternatives Inc	http://dai.com/	100	72.25	21	88	5%	28	34%	88	3.18	85	20902
94	SRI International	https://www.sri.com/	100	73	21	88	8%	66	30%	79	2.47	59	32039
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Methodology – what are the metrics?

- We scanned between up to 100 pages of content using automated crawling tools.
- We crawled starting from the publicly available URL.
- Certain pages within the sample contain non-textual content (e.g.: videos). We omitted these pages from our scan.
- If scans had fewer than 100 pages, we included the page count and word count for each agency.
- We were unable to crawl 5 of the top 100 websites. This normally happens when a site forbids crawlers (as specified in the robots.txt file).

We calculated the index based on 4 metrics. Each metric contributes equally to the final score. The metrics are:

Metric	Formula
<p>1. Readability</p> <p>Readability ranges from 1 to 100. 100 is the top mark. If communicating with citizens, aim for at least 60.</p> <p>This uses the Flesch Reading Ease index.</p>	$(206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{Average Sentence Length}) - (84.6 \times \text{Average Syllables per Word}))$
<p>2. Passive Language</p> <p>The % rating is the proportion of sentences with a passive construction. Passive language is where the subject is acted upon by the verb. For example:</p> <p>"Quality is monitored" vs. "We monitor quality"</p> <p>If you use active voice, you will increase clarity & strength. You will also flush out the 'actor', i.e. who did the action?</p>	$(\text{Passive Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$
<p>3. Long Sentences</p> <p>The % rating is the proportion of sentences that are longer than 20 words. Long sentences mask multiple concepts. Splitting up these sentences will result in a clearer message.</p>	$(\text{Long Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$

4. Complex Word Density

The density rating is the proportion of complex words relative to the total word count. This scan looks for complex words/phrases based on Federal Guidelines. See <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/implewords.cfm> for the list scanned. Replacing complex words with simpler words helps your readers concentrate on your content

(Complex Words/Total Words * 100)

About VisibleThread

VisibleThread provides content analysis solutions for sales and marketing professionals. We flag poor quality and complex language for documents and websites. This eliminates tedious manual review cycles, saving you time and cost.

Our solutions & reports allow customers to:

- Scan docs and websites in minutes
- Identify risky and complex language with objective metrics
- Benchmark web sites against sector peers
- Flag compliance issues

For corporate teams, government agencies and non-profits, our solutions make review teams 40% more efficient and increase sales and marketing conversions.

For questions or if you want a specific sector index:

- For a specific agency, bureau or sector index, email: sales@visiblethread.com
- For questions on the metrics or methodology, email: support@visiblethread.com