

# Country Name Choice and Policy Documents Readability

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**Abstract:** *This study explores how the choice between “Korea” and “South Korea” affects the readability of policy documents. An analysis of 89 documents found that those using “South Korea” had slightly higher average readability scores ( $M = 43.46$ ) compared to those using “Korea” ( $M = 38.37$ ). However, this difference was not statistically significant ( $t = 0.47$ ,  $p = 0.64$ ). This null finding suggests that the choice of country name may not significantly impact the readability of KIEP policy reports. This result is also reassuring, alleviating initial concerns that authors who ignore international naming conventions might produce less readable texts. Furthermore, this pilot study lays the groundwork for future regression analyses examining factors influencing readability, such as author gender, education, and the use of passive voice.*

**Keywords:** Country Name Choice; Korea; South Korea; Readability; Policy Documents

## 1. Introduction

During my tenure as an English editor at the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP), I observed a recurring pattern among research staff: some referred to the Republic of Korea as simply “Korea,” while others consistently used “South Korea,” a term widely accepted in international contexts. Within the institute, this linguistic choice was not merely editorial but sometimes provoked internal debates. While most international publications and organizations uniformly adopt “South Korea,” some researchers insisted on “Korea” alone, arguing that the Republic of Korea legally encompasses the entire Korean Peninsula under its Constitution. This divergence occasionally reflected differing perspectives on national identity and sovereignty. In the field of policy communication, even subtle linguistic cues can carry implications for how readers perceive professionalism, objectivity, and inclusiveness. Word choice—especially in politically and culturally sensitive contexts—can shape the perceived legitimacy of policy discourse. In this respect, national naming conventions offer a unique lens through which to examine institutional language practices and their potential influence on readability. Namely, beyond its political or symbolic dimensions, the variation raised a communication-oriented question: could the insistence on using “Korea” instead of “South Korea”, potentially disregarding international conventions, also reflect a lower reader-friendliness of the author? If so, might documents authored by those favoring “Korea” be less readable? That leads to my research question: is country name choice, “Korea” vs. “South Korea”, associated with policy paper readability?

This inquiry also connects to broader debates in policy linguistics, where readability is increasingly viewed as an indicator of transparency and accessibility. Previous studies have linked textual complexity to bureaucratic distance and reader fatigue, suggesting that clarity-enhancing language may improve public understanding of policy content. Yet few studies have investigated whether small lexical variations such as country name choice bear any relation to readability metrics. Building on these observations, this study examines whether the author’s preference for “Korea” or “South Korea” correlates with differences in textual readability, as measured by the Flesch Reading Ease index. As a pilot study, the present research forms the first stage of a broader program on the determinants of policy-document readability. It focuses on a single lexical variable, country name choice here, as a preliminary test of whether it serves as a readability proxy. A subsequent working paper of mine [1] expands this investigation by applying multivariate regression to syntactic features, specifically passive-voice frequency, across a larger corpus of KIEP documents. Together, these studies trace a progression from exploratory comparison to causal modeling of readability in policy communication. What comes next is

the literature review for development of the hypothesis for this study, followed by the methodology, the results, and finally the discussion and the conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

Low readability incurs significant costs in communication by increasing the time and effort required for readers to process information. As noted above, readability in this study is measured based on syntax rather than content. However, syntax and content are inherently related: more complex content often requires more sophisticated syntactic structures to convey nuanced ideas effectively. This is particularly evident in policy reports, where intricate concepts and specialized knowledge demand corresponding linguistic complexity. In order to mitigate the confounding effects of content complexity, this study samples 89 policy papers covering a diverse range of global economic issues, all published within the past 12 months of this study. This controlled sample ensures that any observed variation in readability is more likely attributable to the linguistic choices: the selection of a country name, Korea vs. South Korea, rather than to other extraneous factors such as topic complexity or publication timing. There have been two key approaches in readability research: quantitative and qualitative.

### 2.1 Quantitative Readability Research

Quantitative readability research provides systematic methods to assess the complexity of texts. Prominent readability formulas such as the Flesch Reading Ease [2], Gunning Fog Index [3], and SMOG formula [4] analyze factors like sentence length and word complexity to produce standardized scores. These metrics are especially useful in contexts where objective comparisons are needed, such as financial disclosures [5-7], policy reports (e.g., [8-10]), and public communications [11-13].

In the financial reporting domain, IFRS adoption has highlighted the interplay between global accounting standards and readability. A study focusing on Korean firms during their transition to IFRS found that IFRS-based financial statements were significantly less readable compared to those under local accounting standards (K-GAAP). This readability loss stemmed from IFRS's principle-based approach, requiring more narrative disclosures, and the use of literal translation strategies that prioritize technical accuracy over linguistic clarity [14]. Beyond Korean firms, readability has been a central topic in several other contexts. For instance, [15] examined UK-listed companies and observed that IFRS adoption resulted in longer and more complex narrative disclosures, which negatively affected the readability of financial statements. The increased volume of narrative content required by IFRS, such as management discussion and analysis (MD&A) sections, often led to higher cognitive loads for readers. Similarly, [16] studied Australian firms and reported that the mandatory adoption of IFRS increased the complexity of financial disclosures, as evidenced by lower Flesch Reading Ease scores and higher Gunning Fog Index scores. They found that this reduced readability was particularly problematic for small investors, who rely heavily on annual reports for decision making.

Reference [17] highlighted that complex financial disclosure not only reduces readability but can also deter retail investors from engaging with financial reports. Reference [17] indicated that firms often use complex language strategically to obscure unfavorable information, a practice that exacerbates information asymmetry between management and shareholders. Reference [18] explored the readability of 10-K filings in the U.S., demonstrating that less readable filings are associated with lower stock returns and higher volatility. Their research underscored the economic implications of readability, suggesting that investors penalize firms that produce less accessible financial disclosures. Reference [8] analyzed the impact of readability on investor behavior, finding that poorly written 10-K reports lead to underreaction by investors. This highlights how low readability can delay the market's absorption of critical information, adversely affecting capital market efficiency.

In the public communication domain, readability has been a critical area of research, particularly in assessing the effectiveness of government and organizational efforts to convey essential information to the public. Studies consistently highlight the challenges of aligning the complexity of communication materials with the literacy levels of their intended audiences, where low readability can undermine trust, engagement, and overall impact. For instance, [9] examined public health policy documents and guidelines, revealing that most were written at levels far exceeding the average literacy capabilities of the general population. Using the Flesch Reading Ease and SMOG formulas, they demonstrated that technical jargon and overly long sentences impeded comprehension, especially among populations with lower literacy levels. Similar findings were

reported by [19], who noted that public health materials often lacked the clarity needed to ensure effective dissemination, thereby limiting their impact on health outcomes. The readability of government websites has also been a focus of research.

Reference [12] evaluated the readability of over 50 U.S. government websites and discovered that 78% of the content required college-level reading skills, far above the recommended eighth-grade level for public-facing materials. Reference [10] analyzed reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and found that the dense use of scientific terminology and complex syntactic structures alienated non-expert audiences, despite the critical importance of the subject matter. Their findings aligned with earlier studies by [20, 21], which indicated that including accessible summaries written in plain language dramatically increased reader comprehension and willingness to act on climate-related recommendations. Legal and policy documents provide additional examples of readability challenges in public communication. Reference [13] analyzed public notices, consumer safety warnings, and legal documentation, concluding that overly technical language and inconsistent terminology reduced comprehension among target audiences. Similarly, [22] demonstrated that revising legal texts in accordance with plain-language principles not only improved readability scores but also increased user satisfaction and compliance rates.

References [13]'s and [22]'s findings underscore the importance of deliberate linguistic strategies in contexts where understanding is essential for public safety and effective governance. Efforts to enhance readability in public communication have also been formalized through initiatives like the U.S. Plain Writing Act of 2010, which mandates that federal agencies write documents that are clear, concise, and easy to understand. Reference [23, 24] noted that materials revised under this framework achieved substantially better readability scores and user feedback, consistent with findings from research on European public policy reports [10]. These initiatives illustrate the measurable benefits of prioritizing readability in public communication. The relationship between readability and user behavior is particularly evident in health communication. Reference [20] demonstrated that patients provided with well-structured, accessible materials were significantly more likely to follow medical instructions correctly, improving health outcomes. Similar studies, for example, [22], confirmed that simplifying language and structuring information clearly led to higher levels of patient understanding, even for complex medical procedures. These studies collectively highlight the critical importance of readability in public communication. Whether in health, legal, or policy contexts, misaligned complexity reduces engagement and trust, often leading to a failure in achieving communication goals [11], [13], [19]. By adopting readability-focused strategies, such as plain language principles and structured summaries, public communication materials can more effectively bridge the gap between technical content and audience comprehension.

## 2.2 Qualitative Readability Research

Qualitative readability research complements quantitative methods by focusing on how readers interpret and engage with text in specific contexts. This approach emphasizes understanding the interaction between text features, audience characteristics, and cultural factors, often using methods such as interviews, focus groups, and textual analysis [25]. Unlike formula-based metrics, qualitative research considers the interpretive aspects of comprehension, making it particularly valuable for evaluating complex texts like policy reports and financial disclosures.

In the financial reporting domain, qualitative research has shed light on the barriers readers face when engaging with financial statements. For example, [5] conducted interviews with investors and analysts to explore their perceptions of financial disclosures. Their findings revealed that many readers felt overwhelmed by the volume of information presented in IFRS-compliant reports, citing inconsistencies in terminology and overly dense narratives as key obstacles to understanding. This is consistent with findings from [25], who used focus groups to assess how non-professional investors interpret financial reports. Participants reported that lengthy disclosures often caused them to skip critical sections, undermining the intended purpose of transparency. Similarly, qualitative studies on corporate disclosures highlight the role of narrative structure in shaping readability. Reference [26] analyzed the MD&A sections of annual reports and found that reports with logically organized narratives and consistent terminology were perceived as more accessible by both expert and non-expert readers. This suggests that beyond syntactic readability, the coherence and flow of information are equally critical to audience engagement. Cultural context is another dimension explored in qualitative readability research. For instance, [27, 28] examined the financial disclosures of multinational corporations operating in Asia and found that cultural differences significantly influenced how readers interpreted the content.

In contexts where indirect communication styles are preferred, reports using straightforward, explicit language were often perceived as overly assertive or even misleading, underscoring the need for cultural adaptation in crafting financial disclosures.

In policy writing, qualitative research has provided similar insights into the challenges of effective communication. Reference [12] analyzed public policy documents through reader think-aloud protocols, revealing that inconsistent terminology and excessive use of jargon created barriers to comprehension for lay audiences. This was further corroborated by [12], who found that authors' perceptions of their target audience heavily influenced their language choices. For example, reports intended for policymakers often adopted a formal tone, prioritizing authority over accessibility, whereas documents for broader audiences included more simplified language and summaries.

Another area of qualitative focus is how specific terminology choices influence reader perception and trust. Reference [1] examined the readability of international policy documents and found that inconsistent naming conventions led to confusion among global audiences, particularly in contexts requiring precise geographic or political references. This observation aligns with the premise of this study, which investigates the relationship between country name choice and readability in policy documents. Qualitative research also explores the impact of linguistic features on reader engagement. For instance, [29, 30] analyzed legal and policy documents using a combination of interviews and content analysis. He found that readers often disengaged when faced with dense, passive constructions, favoring documents with active voice and simpler sentence structures. This highlights the importance of syntactic and semantic choices in crafting readable documents.

### 2.3 Hypothesis Development

While extensive research exists on both quantitative and qualitative approaches to readability, these studies primarily focus on factors such as sentence length, word complexity, narrative coherence, and audience alignment. However, there has been little research so far on whether a single term could serve as a proxy for readability, much less a research question of whether a specific country name affects the readability of policy documents. Quantitative readability research, as discussed above, highlights the importance of syntactic features like sentence structure and word length in determining the readability of texts. Metrics such as the Flesch Reading Ease and Gunning Fog Index suggest that shorter words and phrases generally enhance readability by reducing the cognitive load on readers. However, in the present context, readability is not a property of the word "Korea" or "South Korea" themselves, but of the authors who choose between them. The use of "South Korea" may signal an author's awareness of international readers and a deliberate effort to enhance clarity and accessibility.

In contrast, the consistent use of "Korea" alone—despite possible ambiguity in global contexts—could reflect a more domestically oriented perspective, less attuned to reader comprehension across audiences. This contrast between communicative openness and domestic convention defines the central research question of this study: whether the author's naming choice serves as an indicator of reader-oriented writing quality. Since no prior research has empirically demonstrated that a specific lexical choice, such as a country name, can determine the overall readability of a document, this study adopts a conservative stance and formulates the null hypothesis as follows:

H<sub>0</sub> : Country name choice, Korea or South Korea, is not associated with readability.

### 3. Methodology

This study examines the intersection of country name choice and readability in policy documents produced by the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP). A structured methodology including sample selection, country name identification, and readability evaluation was employed. The dataset comprised 89 policy documents published between 2023 and 2024, selected to cover various finance and economic issues like economic policy, international relations, and trade analysis. The curated selection of KIEP documents ensured a focused dataset for detailed analysis. Future studies could extend this approach by including policy documents from a broader range of institutions across Korea, allowing for a more comprehensive examination of linguistic practices and their impact on readability across different organizations and research topics.

The analysis of terminology focused on how authors refer to South Korea in their policy documents—using "Korea," "South Korea," or "ROK." Due to the limited use of "ROK" (approximately 5% of cases), these instances were grouped with "South Korea" to improve statistical robustness and emphasize the primary

dichotomy between the two options: Korea and South Korea. Each document was manually reviewed to determine the dominant term used. A document was categorized based on its most frequently used term, even if occasional variations were present. This method ensured that the dataset accurately captured overarching language patterns, offering insights into the choices authors make when addressing international and domestic audiences.

In this study, readability is measured using the Flesch Reading Ease score, which evaluates the complexity of text based on average sentence length and the average number of syllables per word. This formula produces a standardized score, higher scores indicating easier-to-read texts and lower scores suggesting greater complexity. The Flesch Reading Ease score is widely used in readability research across various domains, including education, health communication, financial disclosures, and policy writing, making it a robust tool for assessing textual accessibility. To ensure accuracy and consistency, Python-assisted methods were used to extract readability metrics automatically, leveraging natural language processing (NLP) techniques. The automated results were then cross-verified manually to address anomalies arising from unique document formats or the presence of technical jargon, ensuring a balanced and thorough assessment of readability across the dataset.

Statistical methods were applied to examine the relationship between country name choice and readability. Descriptive statistics and hypothesis testing, such as t-tests, were used to identify significant differences in readability scores between the two options. The analysis aimed to determine whether the use of “South Korea” was associated with higher readability scores compared to “Korea,” reflecting a more internationally aligned and potentially clearer approach to terminology. These statistical methods provided a rigorous and methodologically sound basis for uncovering patterns and drawing meaningful conclusions from the data.

By focusing on country name choice and readability, this study contributes to the broader understanding of how linguistic choices influence the accessibility and clarity of policy documents. The findings underscore the importance of standardized and audience-appropriate terminology in enhancing document readability, particularly for materials intended for diverse global audiences. These insights can inform best practices in policy writing and encourage further research into the interplay between language and readability in institutional communication. Expanding the scope to include more varied institutional data and applying more advanced analytical techniques could further enrich this field of study, paving the way for broader applications in international policy and communication. Although the current analysis, as a pilot study, employs a two-sample t-test suitable for group-level mean comparison, regression-based modeling was later implemented in the author’s follow-up working paper [1] to explore potential causal mechanisms and to control for additional author-specific factors such as age, gender, and education of the researching staff at KIEP. This staged approach—descriptive first, then causal—reflects the incremental design of the research project. This study serves as a pilot study in the broader project.

#### 4. Results

This section presents the findings on how country name choice in KIEP policy documents as a proxy for authors’ consideration for their readers impacts readability, focusing on how South Korea is referred to—either as “Korea” or “South Korea” (including “ROK”). The analysis provides insights into patterns of country name use, differences in readability scores, and the implications of these findings for policy communication. The 89 analyzed policy documents demonstrated varied preferences in referring to South Korea. Among these, “Korea” was the most commonly used term, appearing in 57 documents, or 64% of the sample, while “South Korea” (including “ROK”) was used in 32 ones, or 36% of the sample. The predominance of “Korea” reflects its familiarity among domestic researchers and its habitual use within the institute, rather than any conscious concern for readability. In contrast, the consistent use of “South Korea” by some authors appears to reflect greater awareness of international readership and communicative clarity, an effort to prevent potential confusion with North Korea and to align with global conventions. The limited appearance of “ROK” (about 5% of cases) represents its restricted, formal use in technical or diplomatic contexts.

Readability scores were calculated for each document and grouped by country name option; Korea Group vs. South Korea Group. Documents referring to the Republic of Korea as “Korea” demonstrated an average readability score of 38.37, while those using “South Korea” (including “ROK”) achieved an average score of 43.46. Considering the rationale discussed earlier, this outcome is largely consistent with expectations: authors who consciously use “South Korea” tend to be more attuned to international readability norms, which could result in slightly higher readability scores, even if not to a statistically significant extent.

A two-sample t-test (see the table below) was conducted to determine whether the difference in readability scores is statistically significant. The results showed that although the readability scores associated with “South Korea” were higher, the difference was not statistically significant ( $t = 0.47$ ,  $p = 0.638$ ). Consequently, the null hypothesis of no difference in readability scores between “Korea” and “South Korea” cannot be rejected. This result suggests that the observed variation in readability scores may not be directly attributable to country names choice and could be influenced by other factors, such as sentence complexity or context.

**Table 1.** Univariate analysis of readability for the two author groups ( $n=89$ )

	<b>Section A</b> <b>Observations with</b> <b>KOREA Group</b>	<b>Section B</b> <b>Observations with</b> <b>SOUTH KOREA Group</b>	<b>Section C</b>
	Mean	Mean	Difference
Readability <sup>1</sup>	38.3661	43.4603	-5.0942
Hypothesized Mean			0
<i>t</i> -statistics			0.4717
<i>p</i> -value (two-tailed)			0.6383
Sample Size	57	32	

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Readability : readability index calculated by the *Flesch Reading Ease* formula.

Flesch Reading Ease formula:  $206.835 - 84.6 \times AWL - 1.015 \times ASL$

where \*AWL : average word length as measured by the number of syllables in a word;

\*ASL : average sentence length as measured by the number of words in a sentence.

The table above presents the detailed results of the t-test, highlighting key statistics such as means, sample sizes, and p-values for the two groups. The table shows that while there is a difference of -5.0942 between the mean readability scores, this difference is not statistically significant, leaving the findings less definitive than initially anticipated. The findings suggest that the observed differences in readability are not primarily the result of deliberate efforts to enhance reader accessibility through naming choices. Rather, they likely reflect other factors such as institutional habit, stylistic convention, or even expressions of national identity. In this sense, the preference for “Korea” may represent continuity of internal editorial tradition or patriotic orientation rather than a conscious disregard for international readability norms.

This interpretation reinforces the conclusion that naming choice, while symbolically meaningful, is not a reliable quantitative indicator of readability. The results therefore point to the need to examine other linguistic habits that may more directly affect readability in policy documents. For example, the frequent use of passive voice—a common feature in bureaucratic or formal writing—may reduce clarity and reader engagement. Such factors will be systematically explored in the author’s subsequent study on syntactic determinants of readability.

## 5. Discussion

The results invite a fresh interpretation: the absence of a statistically significant relationship between country name choice and readability is in fact good news. This finding alleviates an initial concern that authors who disregarded international naming conventions—by insisting on “Korea” instead of “South Korea”—might also show less reader friendliness. The data indicate that such concern was unfounded. In other words, the authors’ preference for one national term over another, whether driven by habit, institutional convention, or symbolic reasoning, does not compromise the communicative transparency of their writing.

Viewed from this perspective, the non-significant result becomes a meaningful insight into institutional writing culture. It shows that even within a setting where ideological or identity-based expressions coexist with international communication norms, textual readability remains unaffected. This outcome suggests that internal stylistic diversity—such as the dual use of “Korea” and “South Korea”—may represent symbolic or habitual variation rather than functional differences in writing quality.

At the same time, the findings reinforce that readability in policy documents depends far more on structural and syntactic design than on lexical choice. For institutions like KIEP, improving communicative effectiveness

therefore requires attention to sentence structure, cohesion, and information flow rather than standardizing single-word terminology.

Finally, this result highlights the value of examining null findings from a broader methodological perspective. The discovery that naming choice does not predict readability helps define the limits of linguistic influence and redirects scholarly attention to other stylistic habits that may more directly affect text clarity. For instance, the frequent use of passive constructions or excessive nominalization—both common in bureaucratic writing—may play a far greater role in shaping readability than lexical conventions. These observations ultimately led to the author's subsequent research [1], which investigates how passive voice use affects the readability of policy documents.

## 6. Conclusions

This study investigated whether the choice between “Korea” and “South Korea” in policy documents reflects differences in readability. Analyzing 89 KIEP reports showed that while texts using “South Korea” recorded slightly higher readability scores, the difference was not statistically significant. This result is meaningful because it demonstrates that institutional naming habits do not affect how readable policy documents are. This finding is also reassuring, given the initial concern that authors who disregarded international naming conventions by insisting on “Korea” might produce less readable texts. The analysis shows that such concern was unfounded.

The findings further suggest that readability depends far more on how sentences are constructed and information is organized than on the use of specific terms. The long-standing dual naming practice—“Korea” and “South Korea”—may carry symbolic or ideological meaning, but it does not reduce readability. Thus, linguistic variation within the institution reflects identity or convention rather than a loss of reader-oriented quality. From a theoretical perspective, this study clarifies the limits of lexical influence on readability and highlights the need to examine broader stylistic and structural factors. Practically, it implies that improving readability in institutional writing requires attention to syntax, cohesion, and document design rather than enforcing uniform terminology. Finally, this research serves as a pilot step toward identifying key linguistic determinants of readability. Building on these findings, the author's subsequent study focuses on syntactic features, particularly the frequency of passive constructions, to further explore how structural patterns shape readability in policy discourse.

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