Making Reading Easier
Making Reading Easier

For children and young people to be able to take part fully in all areas of the school curriculum it’s essential that they are able to read and understand written information.

This increasingly demands a high level of comprehension and the application of knowledge, rather than a simple ability to decode.

Children who lack confidence with these crucial skills are often faced with an immediate barrier if the written information they are given doesn’t take account of their difficulties.

As part of a strategy to address this issue it is possible to present written information such as handouts and worksheets in a way that makes reading easier.

Design

Here are some of the elements that you should watch for in the design of your material:

- White Space
- Leading
- Type Choice and Size
- Use of Upper and Lower Case
- Illustrations. Bleeding. Overprinting
- Page Layout. Page Breaks
- Paper Choice. Paper Colour.

Readability

If you want to make the material you produce easier to read, pay attention to:

- Sentence Length
- Choice of Words
- Readability Tests.
For children, difficulties with reading are often more to do with the look and layout of a worksheet or handout, than with the complexity of the text itself. In their efforts to produce attractive, eye-catching material, designers are sometimes tempted to sacrifice clear layout. This is particularly true of material designed for the ‘youth market’. Complicated layout and design can confuse children with reading difficulties. However, there are ways in which material can be made easier to read.

It’s important that children can find their way around a text easily. Too much text on a page can be a deterrent to getting started on reading. Columns too close together can cause confusion with some children reading ‘over’ from one to the next.

Children with reading problems need short, clearly separated ‘chunks’ of text which they can work through at their own pace. This helps them to see how far they have to go, and reduces the chances of them giving up. Pages that have no margins, or little space between paragraphs are generally more difficult to read.
Leading

The spacing between lines is also an important factor in making reading easier. Too close and the hesitant reader will tend to drop lines; too far apart and the reader will not be clear whether the lines relate to each other at all. Obviously leading depends on type size but with normal 12pt type, a leading of 2pt is sensible.

Type Choice and Size

There are endless debates about whether serifed or sans serifed types are easier to read and whether children with reading problems find it difficult to recognise ‘a’ or ‘g’ in the different types. Most children with reading difficulties can recognise and differentiate the letters of the alphabet. Types chosen need to be reasonably clear (gothic not recommended, for example), and distinct (avoid types where ‘rn’ can easily be mistaken for ‘m’, etc.). Much of the Basic Skills material for students is set in Century Schoolbook, Plantin or Helvetica.

Type size inevitably relates to the nature and purpose of the text. It is worth guarding against too large a type for booklets or leaflets produced for older children. They may be put off if they feel the material appears to be childish.
Use of Upper and Lower Case

You may have noticed that major road signs use upper and lower case for cities and towns, whereas on minor roads the older signposts still show directions in upper case only. Upper and lower case is easier to read (for all of us) than upper case only. The shape of the word is an aid to the reading of the name of the town, (e.g. London, Northampton, or Luton and Leeds as opposed to LUTON and LEEDS).

The same is true for reading texts: the overuse of upper case, for example to convey emphasis, is counter-productive. It is less likely that the text will be read, not more likely. Far better to use bold type, or boxing, to show the importance of a part of the text.

Illustrations and Overprinting

It is essential to use illustrations, photographs, etc., to break up the density of text. It is even better if the illustrations relate directly to the surrounding text, so that a pupil with reading problems can use the illustration as a clue to the text itself. The illustration should, wherever possible, come at the end of paragraphs or sentences, rather than in the middle of them.

Currently there is a tendency to use illustrations as background, with print running over some areas of the illustrations. This makes the text generally more difficult to read.
Page Layout and Page Breaks

In addition to the use of white space, care should be taken about the layout of pages. Ideally headings and new sections should come at the top of pages, and sentences and paragraphs should not run over columns or pages. Lines between columns can be helpful. Page numbering should be clear.

Paper Choice and Paper Colour

The paper that is used should be thick enough to ensure that there is not a high degree of ‘shadowing’ from the text over the page. Some material is difficult to read because of this, and letters and words become difficult to distinguish. Obviously thicker paper is more expensive, but it is worth it if you want the message to get across.

Darker colours generally provide more difficult backgrounds for reading. Blue and purple are worse than others.

Sentence Length

The key to producing clear texts is often the way you write, rather than what you write about. Some subjects involve the use of difficult language and concepts – they can none the less be clearly communicated. Sentence length is an extremely important part of this. Sentences (like this one) which run for several lines, with several clauses (and asides including brackets), and which are probably several sentences shoved into one, are not easy for children with reading problems. It is far better to write sentences with one or two clauses. It is worth trying to include one main point only in each sentence. Use full stops rather than semi-colons.

Similarly, shorter paragraphs are in general easier to read. Lines and lines of dense print can be difficult for the eye to ‘track’. It may mean that readers have forgotten the sense of the beginning of the paragraph by the time they get to the end.
Choice of Words

Newspaper writers have a notion of the style that requires them to use a certain kind of jargon. For instance, rather than repeat the word ‘said’, they will use ‘stated’, ‘revealed’, ‘declared’, ‘claimed’, etc. In most cases ‘said’ would do. For children with reading problems repetition can be very helpful, particularly with words that may be unfamiliar.

Choosing words that are easier to read is not always an option. All subjects have technical words which children will need to read. For example, there is no easy way to write ‘electricity’ – ‘power that comes out of a plug’ is both confusing and inaccurate. A child with reading problems will need to develop strategies in order to recognise the word as it appears in a text. Try therefore to use the appropriate word, rather than trying to paraphrase simply.

The passive voice is often more difficult for children with reading problems to understand. e.g.

‘the screw is placed in the securing hole’

‘Put the screw in the securing hole.’

It may not always be possible to avoid the use of the passive voice, but in general active voice is easier to understand.

Try to avoid the grouping of noun and adjectives into large clusters, e.g.

‘Middle East hostage release negotiation drama’.

The ‘key words’ such as of, it, to, and, is, etc. are easy to recognise for adults with reading problems and provide a welcome relief from working out longer and more difficult words – so use them.

Readability Tests

You may wish to check the readability of your material. There are a number of word processing packages which are now available to do this, or you could use tests such as SMOG which will give you a rough guide of the level of difficulty of your text (see overleaf).
SMOG Readability Formula – Simplified

Readability is an attempt to match the reading level of written material to the ‘reading with understanding’ level of the reader.

This formula calculates readability using sentence and word length. However, other factors affect understanding of what you are reading that cannot be measured in this way, e.g. motivation of reader, size and type of print, layout of written material, previous knowledge of subject, style of writer, etc.

SMOG is much quicker and easier to work out by hand than other formulae.

1. Select a text
2. Count 10 sentences
3. Count number of words which have three or more syllables
4. Multiply this by 3
5. Circle the number closest to your answer
6. Find the square root of the number you circled
7. Add 8

A readability level under about 10 will be able to be understood by most people.

For further copies contact:
The Basic Skills Agency
Admail 524, London WC1A 1BR
Tel: 0870 600 2400 • Fax: 0870 600 2401