

Clarity of text - a guide for teachers, parents and those who prepare text for children with reading difficulty

Fonts and letter shape

- Use Verdana or Tahoma unless your students show a strong preference for a different font.
- Use the same font throughout the document.
- Use a font size one or two points larger than that in the students' textbooks.
- Use large spacing between letters and lines, sentences, and paragraphs. Many people find double line spacing helpful. Avoid single spacing.
- Highlight sparingly using **Bold**. Avoid *italics* and underlining which change the apparent shape of letters.

Font

People often express strong preferences for and against serifs (the curled ends of letters in fonts such as Times New Roman). There is no evidence that serifs make letters easier to see.

The eyes re-align together when they look at a word, and this takes longer if the letters form regular vertical stripes. Verdana is a sans serif font that has few vertical stripes and is quicker to read than Times New Roman. Tahoma is also a font with few "stripes".

Font size.

The text in children's reading schemes gets small at too young an age. Children aged 5-9 usually read more quickly and more accurately with a font that is larger than the one provided in their textbooks. Students over the age of 10 with reading difficulty may find it easier to read 14pt than a more conventional size.

Layout

- Each paragraph should express an idea.
- Cluster the ideas beneath simple headings.
- Break up dense blocks of text
 - ✓ Use short paragraphs.
 - ✓ Use bullets or numbers
 - ✓ Use boxes to break up text
- Use wide margins and space round headings
- Use left justification, and keep the right margin ragged.
- Keep the design simple – avoid clutter.
- Avoid placing text on top of background graphics.

Spacing

Sometimes children with reading difficulties express marked preferences for atypical font size and spacing. Usually, but not invariably, they find it helpful to have extra space around the letters. It may even be preferable to use a smaller font size if this means that it is possible to use more space around the letters.

The space around headings and paragraphs should be such that each paragraph and heading can be readily discerned in peripheral vision. Peripheral vision is used to guide the eyes around a page.

To check whether the spacing in text is sufficient, hold the page at a distance of 3m. At this distance you can see what the eyes see in peripheral vision at normal reading distances. Text with a well designed layout appears as clearly segregated blocks. Note that fine lines between paragraphs and underlining beneath headings can fill in space so that the text appears homogenous in peripheral vision, and there is then little information to guide the eyes.

Colour of background.

- Consider that some students may find it easier to read from text on a coloured background, but the colour depends on the individual.
- If your students are using coloured overlays for reading, the best colour of paper is cream or off-white.
- Coloured overlays cannot be used for written work, so consider using coloured paper for worksheets and handouts that need to be written on. Choose a colour as similar as possible to each individual student's overlay.

Colour of text

- Use colour sparingly, and only for emphasis, for example in headings.
- Alternate lines in different colour can sometimes be useful for boardwork, but extra space round lines is generally preferable, particularly for individuals with visual stress.

Colour of text and background

The colour of the page can have a large effect on the clarity of text printed on it, but the colour that improves clarity for one person can make things worse for another.

Overlays are designed to be used on paper that is not itself coloured.

The large differences between individuals mean that cream, buff or off-white paper is the best compromise "one size fits all", and it is suitable for use with overlays.

High quality white paper often contains brightening agents that convert ultraviolet radiation to visible light, making the white paper "whiter than white". Recycled paper does not usually contain these agents and may be more restful on the eyes.

Colouring the text of headings can aid clarity by helping to separate the heading from the body of the text. Otherwise colour should be used sparingly.

Consider alternative methods of presenting information

- Spider diagrams (mind maps)
- Flow charts to explain procedures
- Pictograms, icons and graphics to help locate information
- Lists (e.g. of 'Do's and Don'ts')

Remember

- Glossaries of abbreviations and jargon
- Contents page
- Index