Readability

How to produce clear written materials for a range of readers
For children, young people and adult learners to be able to take part fully in all areas of the 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.

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

It’s possible to choose written information in a way that makes reading easier as part of a strategy to address this issue.

Both the design and the readability levels of texts determine how easy they are to read.

This leaflet describes elements of each to consider when finding texts to match the abilities of readers.
Difficulties with reading are often more to do with the look and layout of a text, 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. Complicated layout and design can confuse those with reading difficulties. Here are some of the elements to watch for.

- **White space**

  It’s important that readers 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, leading to reading ‘over’ from one to the next.

  Anyone with reading problems needs short, clearly separated ‘chunks’ of text that 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.
• **Line spacing**

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

• **Font choice and size**

There are endless debates about whether serifed or sans serifed types are easier to read and whether those with reading difficulties find it hard to recognise ‘a’ or ‘g’ in the different types. Most people 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 material is set in Century Schoolbook, Plantin or Helvetica, although *Comic Sans* is also popular.

Type size inevitably relates to the nature and purpose of the text. It is worth watching for too
large a type for booklets or leaflets produced for older readers. 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. The North, Sheffield, Leeds and Nottingham, as opposed to SHEFFIELD or 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**

Illustrations and photographs break up the density of text. They work best if they relate directly to the surrounding text, so that a learner with reading difficulties 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.

Illustrations are sometimes used as background, with print running over them. This generally makes the text more difficult to read.
• **Page layout and page breaks**

In addition to the use of white space, look at 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**

Paper 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 to get the message across.

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

To match the text to the abilities of readers, consider these elements.

- **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 nonetheless be clearly communicated. Sentence length is an extremely important part of this. Sentences (like this one) that run for several lines, with several clauses (and asides including brackets), and that are probably several sentences shoved into one, are not easy for people with reading difficulties. 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**

Some writers have a notion of style that leads 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 readers with
difficulties 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 need to be read. For example, there is no easy way to write ‘electricity’ — ‘power that comes out of a plug’ is both confusing and inaccurate. A reader with difficulties will need to be taught 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 to understand. For example:

‘The screw is placed in the securing hole.’

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

‘Put the screw in the securing hole.’

A noun and adjectives in large clusters are not easy to decode. For example:

‘Middle East hostage release negotiation drama.’

Reading is much easier when the text either matches the ability level of the reader, or is only a little above it. A few simple, quick checks assist in finding out if this is the case.

- **Readability tests**

You may wish to check the readability of your texts. There are a number of word processing packages available to do this, or you could use tests such as SMOG (see overleaf), which will give you a rough guide of the level of difficulty of your text.
**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 (Simple Measure Of Gobbledegook) 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 that have three or more syllables
4. Multiply this by 3
5. Circle the number closest to your answer

| 1 4 9 16 25 36 49 64 81 100 121 144 169 |

6. Find the square root of the number you circled

| 1 4 9 16 25 36 49 64 81 100 121 144 169 |
| 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 |

7. Add 8  →  Readability Level

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