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# Communicator

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Create dyslexia-friendly documents

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# Creating dyslexia-friendly documents

**Robert Pallant** suggests ways to make content more accessible for those with reading difficulties.

Recent issues of *Communicator* have included articles addressing the accessibility of documents to those with various visual, cognitive and learning disabilities. Given the wide range of readers who have to engage with the information supplied by technical communicators, it is important for us to have an appreciation of some of these conditions to help us to do what we can to alleviate their difficulties when reading our content.

This thought occurred to me recently at a networking event in Slough. I was speaking to the chair of trustees for a local organisation that supports adults with dyslexia in managing the condition. When she asked me, "Are your documents dyslexia-friendly?", I confess I was hard pushed to answer, so it was clearly time to learn more. Furthermore, as it has apparently been 18 years since there was an article in our magazine on the subject, I thought perhaps it was timely to share what I have learned.

## Two sides of the coin

Dyslexia is a genetic condition which affects about 10% of the population to some degree. At a fundamental level, it seems to be more prevalent in those people who use different areas of their brains from those areas used by the majority of the population, when processing certain types of information.

The symptoms of dyslexia which impair the ability to read and understand a document are many and varied. Those with the condition report struggling to follow long lines of text, or find they lose their place as their eyes move down the page. Individual letters can be confused, especially those with ascenders or descenders such as b, d, p and q. Text can be faded and blurry and reading can cause headaches. The common denominator is that people with dyslexia have difficulty extracting and retaining information from bodies of text.

Alongside this impairment is the fact that many of those with dyslexia are very visual, even three-dimensional thinkers. They find pictures and diagrams much easier to interpret than text. This ability can extend as far as being able to accurately visualise the appearance of an object before it exists, which is why many people with quite severe dyslexia have had successful careers in professions such as hairdressing, tree surgery and architecture.

There are also other, perhaps unexpected, consequences of dyslexia, such as affected people having problems with timekeeping, and being very literal in the interpretation

of instructions. These arise because of the different ways that the individual's brain is structured, which can make linear concepts more difficult to grasp.

## Style and substance

Preparing content that can be more easily assimilated by people with dyslexia generally falls into two categories; how the information is organised and structured, and its visual presentation. Many of the tenets of good technical writing are of benefit to readers with dyslexia:

1. Keep your writing concise and to the point. Avoid long sentences (60-70 characters in length is recommended by the British Dyslexia Association).
2. Use step-by-step instructions and describe one operation or concept at a time, using the active voice.
3. Keep clauses simple to minimise the need for punctuation. For the same reason, avoid using contractions like aren't or don't.
4. Keep technical jargon and abbreviations to a minimum and make sure any such terms are clearly defined in a glossary.
5. Use frequent summaries to collect the essential points in one location and emphasise them with visual clues such as boxes.
6. Where possible, use diagrams and flow charts to describe processes.

However, there are some aspects of the visual presentation of content that are particularly important for people with dyslexia:

1. Use Sans Serif fonts where possible, as they make it easier to identify the ascenders and descenders that can otherwise cause confusion between letters. Avoid using font sizes below 12 point.
2. Use left-justified text only. Justifying on both sides may cause hyphenation to be needed which can make it more difficult to follow a sentence. It can also introduce irregular spacing between words and cause white 'rivers of space' to appear on the page; these can distract readers with dyslexia (Figure 1).
3. Avoid large blocks of dense text. 'Soften' the appearance of the document as much as possible. Do not squeeze lines together and keep paragraphs short.
4. Do not wrap text around pictures or diagrams as this makes the sentences harder to follow.
5. Only use block capitals sparingly for headings; this changes the shapes of the words from those most readily recognised. For similar reasons, avoid underlining or italics; bold text is the preferred option for giving emphasis.

*Are your documents dyslexia-friendly?*

6. When creating printed documents, avoid double-sided printing unless the paper is of good quality. If the text on the other side is visible it can cause problems for readers with dyslexia. Also use matt rather than glossy paper to minimise reflected light.

Colour can also be problematic. Surprisingly, the combination of black text on a white background, while maximising contrast, can cause the text to distort, blur or even appear to move to some readers. Softer background colours such as cream are often preferred and, in severe cases, coloured overlays can help. However, be wary of taking the colour theme too far. Do not use paper with patterned backgrounds or pictures, and avoid making the contrast of the text and background too low. Also remember that printing words in different colours can have other implications such as for those with colour-blindness.

### How we can help

The content of the information we produce is almost entirely within our control; that is the essence of what technical communicators do. We all know that we have to put ourselves in the place of our audience whenever we are creating content. It may be difficult or impossible for us to understand what it must be like to have a condition such as dyslexia (something which I would imagine most technical authors have not experienced), but we should at least try to assess the profile of the audience and tailor the content accordingly.

For example, a website to help people renew their library books will have a much wider readership than a technical manual for a piece of analytical equipment used in a scientific laboratory. Therefore, the website will clearly need to put a higher priority on accessibility, not only by striving to follow as many of the WCAG guidelines (see references) as possible but also considering those with reading impairments such as dyslexia.

However, there is no reason why many of the same principles should not be applied to the technical manual as well. While it may be necessary to assume a certain level of background knowledge on the part of the reader, there is no need to abandon all attempts to make the text easy to follow and simple to understand just because the audience is more technically specialised. With 10% of the population suffering from some degree of dyslexia, it is hardly a rare condition and there are likely to be readers with dyslexia for almost any content.

The visual appearance of the content is more challenging, because other specialisms such as marketing and brand design have as much, if not more, influence in these areas. (As an example of the challenges, there are several aspects of the style and formatting in

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Figure 1. Fully justifying text creates 'rivers of space' on the page

*Communicator* which are not ideal for those with dyslexia, such as the use of Serif fonts!) However, since we as technical communicators often work alongside these other specialisms in designing content, we at least have a chance to act as advocates for those with accessibility issues, in the same way that we should try to prioritise the needs of all the users of our content. With so many essential processes now taking place via websites rather than face-to-face with a person who can provide guidance, it has never been more important to make sure that those with reading difficulties are not unfairly disadvantaged.

As the British Dyslexia Association states in its design guide, "adopting best practice for dyslexic readers has the advantage of making all written communication easier on the eye for everyone". Surely that is a worthwhile objective?

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