

Designing Instructional and Informational Text: Designing Text for Readers with Special Needs

James Hartley, in his chapter on 'Designing Instructional and Informational Text', discusses the considerations of designing text for readers with special needs (§34.6). Though I expected the section to outline fundamentally different styles than those typically encountered by most readers, I was surprised to find that most of the strategies discussed were quite commonplace. While we might muse at why text on a brochure or other publication is set in 14-point Helvetica rather than the cookie-cutter 12-point Times Roman we are accustomed to, this change makes it no less accessible to us, and may in fact help to make the document more accessible to those with limited sight.

Having spent a few years behind the 'bar' as a Mac Genius, I learned a few things about the 'Accessibility' features of the Mac OS (and other applications, of course). I routinely use Ctrl-Scroll to zoom in on text, Command-Plus to zoom the size of fonts in the web browser, etc. just to aid in my reading of tiny PDF document or web fonts. I shared these shortcuts with customers that were older or had varying levels of limited sight. Such features seem like a no-brainer – many devices support such a 'zoom' feature, be it vector (i.e. scaling up the text point size) or raster (just make everything bigger), but everywhere we see tiny, tiny text. This, to me, is one of the areas where digital technology really levels the field. If I have a printed document in front of me, I can always bring it closer to read tiny print. But many people are not so lucky – they simply cannot resolve the print inside medication boxes, on small electronic devices, or advising them of important points that for some reason did not merit a second printed page.

With the ubiquity of Bluetooth and other wireless technologies, it is possible to provide that any textual (and graphical) information that is printed on an object also be encoded in a (financially and computationally) cheap digital format as well. A system could be constructed (and could run on any modern computer or smartphone) to read and display this information for the benefit of those with limited sight. With the advent of fantastically cheap microprocessors and e-ink screens, this reader could even be constructed so cheaply as to be provided free of charge by medical or advocacy organizations.

Such a reading device could benefit from many of the observations that Hartley discusses. Modifications of the font face, weight, kerning, and leading could be controlled (much like in the Amazon Kindle 'app' for iPhone/iPad/iPod) to suit the reader's optimum readability. With digital text, any of these modifications is computationally cheap and could be controlled with just a minimum of on-screen controls. Such parameters could even be programmed in consultation with a health care practitioner, who could confirm the efficacy of the settings.

Whereas using a device to interact with the world and objects in it might have been seen as either strange or a sci-fi pipe dream just a decade ago, devices like the iPad

and the advances in Augmented Reality have transformed this idea into a much more mainstream activity.

Hartley, James. (2004). Designing Instructional and Informational Text. In D. Jonassen, (Ed.), Handbook of research on educational communications and technology (2nd ed., pp. 917-947). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.