How We Read

With no special instruction, people instinctively learn spoken language. In fact, within just three years, an infant will master a vocabulary of about 1,000 words. Reading, however, must be taught. It's a difficult process, and even after years of instruction, most people remain relatively poor readers into adulthood.

Reading is literally an unnatural act.

This is crucial for you to understand, since so many marketing efforts, depend on your getting people to READ then ACT. In fact, I would go as far to say:

Don't confuse "legibility" with "readability." Readability is about content comprehension — ala Rudolf Flesch — and is the responsibility of the copywriter. Legibility, on the other hand, is about form presentation. This is the designer's responsibility.

Assuming that your copywriter has done a good job of writing your copy, your designer can encourage or discourage readership with the general layout and type treatment. So, your designer had better understand something about reading.

The Reading Process

To understand legibility and how design affects readership — and thereby sales — we must first understand how people read. (Forget how people "should" read. We are only concerned with how the average person actually does read.)

Here are the basics of the reading process:

- **Eye Rhythm** — In Western culture, we print written materials with the words arranged horizontally left to right. To read this material, the eye moves left to right along a line of type and then sweeps to the left and down to the beginning of the next line.

- **Fixations** — As the eye moves along a line of type, it stops at certain points to allow the eye to see and the brain to comprehend one or more words. These stops are called fixations, jumps, or "saccades" from the French saquer meaning to pull. Each fixation is about 1/4 second.

- **Eye Span** — During each fixation, the eye sees the word or words upon which it fixates as well as an area around that point. A reader's eye span may be as small as a single word or as large as whole phrase. A good reader will see about 2 1/2 words per fixation, but the average reader may see less. The ordinary radius maximum is 2 inches around a fixation point. With standard text, this translates to about 29 letter spaces, 17 of which are clearly seen.

- **Thought Units** — The eye span isn't arbitrary. The brain naturally divides sentences into thought units or idea chunks. In the sentence "Bill caught the ball," the two thought units are "Bill" — the person who did something — and "caught the ball" — the thing he did.

- **Configuration** — Every word has a particular shape. With constant, repeated exposure to a word, reading stops and instant recognition begins. When you see a stop sign, for example, you don't mentally sound out S-T-O-P, you perceive the whole

word by its shape and instantaneously understand its meaning. Because numerals have little configuration, the eye fixates more on numbers than words. Also, since there are more shape differences with lower case letters than with capitals, configurations in lower case are recognized faster than all caps.

- **Recognition Rate** — How fast a reader understands words during reading is called the recognition rate (or word response rate or rate of perception). Obviously, the faster a person recognizes a word, the faster and more effortless the reading. In the previous sentence, you probably whizzed over words like "the" and "a," but paused for a split second on "recognizes" and "effortless."

- **Familiarity** — The more familiar a reader is with the type and the appearance of the words used, the easier the reading. Roman or serif faces are generally more familiar to readers. Type that gives words irregular features give words a more distinct and recognizable shape.

- **Reading Rates** — The average person shows a constant increase in reading rate throughout the school years, followed by a sudden drop after graduation. In Junior High, the average reading rate is 200 words per minute (wpm). In High School, it's 250 wpm. In College it rises to 325 wpm and then to 400 wpm in Graduate School. Then it drops back to 200 wpm in adulthood, with reading comprehension at about 50%.

  Compare this to the average rate of speech, which is 140 to 160 wpm, and you'll see that most people read slowly. (By the way, for most people, anything above 600 to 700 wpm is scanning, not reading.)

- **Regression** — Moving the eye back over previously read material is called Regression. Not only does this lower the reading rate, it actually alters the sequence of information into the brain and lowers comprehension.

- **Eye Fatigue** — The average adult eye travels approximately 1,600 feet per day — that's 584,000 feet or 110 miles per year! So, it doesn't take much to produce Eye Fatigue, which in turn slows the recognition rate and generally makes reading slow and even more difficult.

Designing for Readership

Meaningful sales messages are transmitted through language, not design. The goal of design, therefore, is to encourage and support readership. In general, a designer should strive to...

1. Draw attention to the copy and help the reader get started reading.

2. Make reading easy by applying the basic rules of layout and typography.

3. Help communicate the writer's message (not produce a work of art).

Specifically, a designer should make every effort to work with the realities of how people read and make the process as easy and transparent as possible. Here are the basic principles:

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- **Assist the left to right Eye Rhythm** — Use serif type, because the serifs form a lateral line that helps the eye move left to right. Don't set type reading down or at an angle, because that's not the way people read. Don't overdo the leading, because that makes the next line harder to find — a spit second makes a big difference. Set your type flush left and ragged right in most cases, though a justified right margin can work just as well — though not in letters.

- **Avoid unnecessary Fixations and generate necessary one**s — Most reading should flow along with as few stops as necessary. So throw out anything that makes the eye stop in the main text. However, you want the eye to stop on certain important points, such as the 800 number or the order card. Italics, underlines, and bold subheads, for example, create stops at points of textual significance.

- **Work within the natural Eye Span** — Look at a few magazines and newspapers with a high circulation. (Readers Digest or USA Today, for example.) Notice how the best ones often use narrow columns with 5 to 8 words per line. That's because narrow columns work with the natural eye span, while long single columns do not. These publications are designed to be read, as should your promotion.

- **Divide the copy into logical Thought Units** — Clustering ideas so that they can be seen in a single eye span helps the brain process information. Most people actually read and comprehend much better when each eye span takes in a single unit of thought.

  For example, if you have a headline that reads "Now you can have 12 issues for $12," consider breaking the copy into 2 visual parts: "Now you can have / 12 issues for $12." You can do this by putting them on separate lines, by using a second color, with italics or underlines, or any number of ways.

  Leaders (...) and dashes (—) also help to divide up copy into easily absorbed chunks much better than commas, colons, and semi-colons. "Now you can have ... 12 issues for $12."

- **Stick to standard Configurations** — With words, don't set type in all caps or put spaces between letters, because that obliterates all configuration. Stay with lower case and initial caps as often as possible, including most headlines. With numbers, remember that spelling helps the reader whiz through it, but using the numeral will produce a short stop. So, spell numbers that aren't as important and use numerals for numbers that should draw attention.

In addition, my learned colleague James Rosenfield often discusses icons, which he defines as a "communication instantly and involuntarily assimilated by the brain's right hemisphere." Configuration is the buck-fifty word for the same idea. Logos, faces, numbers, words, and personal imagery are all icons.

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- **Use Familiar type and layouts** — In most cases, use a Roman or serif face for body copy unless there's an overwhelming reason not to. Roman faces have more irregular features, which makes words more recognizable.

- **Help the reader avoid Eye Fatigue** — Eye fatigue can result from a number of things, including too many regressions, a reduced reading rate, and a slower recognition rate. Do absolutely everything possible to help the readers eyes move along effortlessly.

For example, use type of about 9 to 12 points for body copy, but slightly larger type for older or younger readers. Break up long copy into smaller chunks, indent paragraphs, and space between paragraphs to let the eye rest every here and there. Prefer black type on white paper. And if you must reverse type to draw the eye, keep it short and 10 or 12 point sans serif (because it's too easy for the ink to fill in the little serifs). Avoid glossy, hard-to-read paper. Avoid text over tints and pictures, unless there is enough contrast.

Of course, assuming a designer can successfully apply these basic principles for legibility, he or she should also attempt to improve the "body language" of the message, create the right impression or "feel" through type that is compatible to the message, help establish credibility and value, illustrate the promise of the sales proposition, and a hundred other vital tasks.

However, nothing is more important than legibility. Ever.

Is this creatively limiting? Absolutely not. In fact, it presents a supreme creative challenge. For just as the copywriter cannot write arbitrarily, the designer cannot design arbitrarily.

And remember, what is important here are not the specific rules, but the principles behind them. A designer must always know why he or she is doing something. How it affects readership.

A designer must ask: What does the writer want to say? Am I helping that message reach the prospect or am I getting in the way? What can I do to help the prospect read this effortlessly?