

People in a hurry need fast, positive and unambiguous answers. They phone us to ask: what's a legible typeface for a technical manual? What point-size should we use in our material for visually-impaired readers? My boss says 'get' is vulgar and wants to say 'acquire'; will our customers understand 'acquire'? Should our bill-reminders be red?

guidelines are not enough

These are all things we have something to say about; however none of them are questions to which we – or anyone – is qualified to give a fast, out-of-context, answer.

They all depend on the context, firstly the

- :: audience(s) and
- :: situation(s) of use

At this 'macro' level, audiences are never homogenous. For instance, the types of visual impairment vary so much that no general advice on typography for this group will be universally useful. Situations of use also vary, and are usually impossible or very difficult to predict.

At the 'micro' level, the ways in which the features of a document interact make it hard to give advice about a particular feature. The 'right' space between lines of type depends, among other things, on the particular typeface, its size, the length of line, the word-space settings (justification or fixed-space settings) the line-end strategy (hyphenation), the text-block's relationship to the page and other graphic elements on it, and so on.

Getting the right result demands

- :: craft skills and
- :: document testing.

Despite a century of research into legibility, readability, comprehension and effective learning strategies, there's still not enough evidence about what makes a good document. Good documents are still partly an act of magic. They are made by good writers and good designers rather than simply by reference to research results.

Good planning and briefing, and good document testing are important, but they are not enough.

All this means that the guidelines we offer on this site are limited and in some situations may be wrong.

Noel Coward was famously asked by amateur actors how they could improve their performances. 'Speak up, and try not to bump into the furniture', he is said to have offered. Our guidelines offer advice at the same level. We hope you find them useful.

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