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One book (doesn’t) fit all: Suggestions for more dyslexia-friendly print books

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I. The argument for print books to be made accessible

With the rise of technology, there are many ways to make text more accessible. Screen readers and audiobooks allow visually impaired and blind readers to access books faster and easier than braille books.[1] Readers with worsening vision and those with print disabilities like dyslexia have the added option of ebooks, which are often available for customisation. For example, in the Kindle iOS app, the reader can alter the background colour, font face, font size, and line spacing. Altogether, we are already living in a more accessible world, where more people can access books than ever before. With this in mind, what reason do we have to make print books more accessible for those with print disabilities, in particular, those with dyslexia?

There are many arguments for providing print books for dyslexic adults, beyond simply that many people prefer print books. Even among non-dyslexic readers, a study found that print books lead to greater comprehension and lower eye fatigue than ebooks for students (Jeong 2012), and another found that chronology and temporality were better recalled when reading print books rather than ebooks (Mangen et al. 2019). In the only study that focuses on dyslexic readers, dyslexic university students could comprehend books *as well as* non-dyslexic readers, but only when they read a printed book—their comprehension of ebooks was found far below their non-dyslexic peers (Cavalli et al. 2019). This suggests that not only do dyslexic readers need print books as much as any other reader, but they may need them even more than the non-dyslexic reader.

The Australian Dyslexia Association (ADA) predicts that between 10% and 20% of people in Australia have dyslexia (2023). Despite the prevalence of dyslexia, there are not many resources available for dyslexic readers in Australia. First of all, no publishing company that publishes standard books in Australia also provides dyslexia-friendly editions. The only dyslexia-friendly books are published by a publishing house called Dyslexic Books. They have a large range of books, including books for both children and adults, but the books are two to three times more

[1] Vision Australia has information on screen readers and audiobooks that are specially designed for those who are blind or visually impaired. In comparison to the relative ease of audio formats, braille books are much larger than a standard book, use thicker pages, and require a special embosser to print them.

expensive than the average book,[2] and there is a delay when it comes to acquiring titles.[3] In 2017, the council of Mitchell Shire spent $5000 on library books formatted with the Dyslexie font (Nielsen 2017), but this is an exception, not the rule. The Australian publishing industry needs to make major changes before dyslexic readers can buy books with the assurance that they'll be able to read them.

II. The text elements that make print books more dyslexia-friendly

Over the past 20 years, research has been growing on the question of how to make text—both print and digital—more accessible for dyslexic readers. There are many text and page elements to keep in mind when it comes to readability, such as font size, inter-letter and inter-word spacing, line spacing, font face, page colour and thickness, margins and gutters, and print quality. There are as many different levels of readability as there are different formats of books.

Some of these elements have been researched more extensively, while others have had very little research done. One of the least controversial, yet not well studied, is the effect of font size. One study found that the 'critical point'—the font size after which reading no longer improves as the size increases—is higher for dyslexic people than non-dyslexic people (O'Brien et al. 2005). In other words, dyslexic readers need a larger font size than non-dyslexic readers for optimal reading speed. Another study found that all readers, dyslexic and non-dyslexic, read better with size 12 than size 10 font on the screen (Bernard et al. 2003). Generally, larger-sized fonts are more readable for those with dyslexia. Unfortunately, we do not know what the optimal font size is for a dyslexic adult reading printed text—certainly, it is higher than 12-point font.

The other most researched text element is the spacing between letters and words. Across many studies—varying in method, age, and spacing—most found that increased inter-letter and inter-word spacing also increased the readability of text for those with dyslexia. Some favoured a larger increase, such as Zorzi et al. (2012) and Sjoblom et al. (2016), where they used an addition of 2.5 points between letters. Two other studies used a smaller inter-letter and inter-word spacing, favouring a 1.0 point increase for inter-letter spacing and a 1.3 point increase for inter-

[2] For example, *The Silk House* by Kayte Nunn costs $67.99 on Dyslexic Books, while Hachette Australia lists the trade paperback as $32.99.

[3] I searched on Dyslexic Books' website for the current top 10 bestselling books in Australia according to Dymocks, and they had only 3 of them. But they provide 9 out of 10 of Nielsen BookScan's list of 2023 adult fiction bestsellers (Books+Publishing 2023).

word spacing (Duranovic et al. 2018; Marinus et al. 2016), in both cases modelling the spacing of the Dyslexie font. Additionally, Perea et al. (2012) examined the effects of a minor increase, 7%, in both inter-letter and inter-word spacing. In all of these studies, the increase of inter-word and inter-letter spacing increased reading speed, and in Perea et al., it was also shown to improve reading comprehension. Many of these studies also found that font face does not make a difference, so long as inter-letter spacing is matched (Duranovic et al. 2018; Marinus et al. 2016; Kuster et al. 2018; Galliussi et al. 2020).

When it comes to line spacing, margins, colours, and print quality, there is much less data to work with. There is one PhD thesis from 2008 that found that increased white space on the page—including bigger margins and 1.5 line spacing—made text more readable for students with dyslexia (Sykes 2008). Another study found that on screens, line spacing does not make a difference, but dyslexic readers prefer black text on a white or cream background over greyscale (Rello and Baeza-Yates 2017). The study mentioned earlier on letter spacing (Sjoblom et al. 2016) also found that colour overlays don't make a difference for print readability. Generally, the effects of these other print elements are under studied, though we may make our own hypotheses about their effects on accessibility. For example, thin pages with more 'ghosting' (where you can see the text from the other side of the page) and low-quality printing leave characters fuzzier and harder to distinguish—both of which we may guess make reading more difficult for all readers.

III. A review of books: How dyslexia-friendly are print books currently?

Knowledge in hand, we are now posed with a new question: How accessible are the books that are currently in print, particularly in Australia, and do any of them already meet the criteria for a dyslexia-friendly book? If so, is it possible to make more books in that format, so that all readers have a better reading experience?

I surveyed 20 books, with 9 of them published in Australia, 7 published in the UK but purchased in Australia, and 4 published and purchased in the US. The books were generally for an adult audience and varied in publisher, publishing year, and genre. For the complete list of the books and their details, please see Table 1.

I measured the books with quantifiable judgements such as font size, line spacing, and gutter size, as well as more qualitative judgements such as page opacity and print quality. Unfortunately, the spacing between letters is too small to measure manually; I suggest that if a

system is implemented for judging the accessibility of books, an online copy of the print book should also be consulted.

To conduct the study, I began by collecting the quantifiable data, starting with font size[4] and going through the gutters and margins. From there, I grouped the books first by their page opacity (how much ghosting occurred), and then by their print clarity. To measure print clarity, I looked at how sharp the words were against the page, how well the letters could be distinguished from each other, and how dark the text was. I noticed that the print clarity was often related to the quality of the paper—on thinner, rougher paper, the characters were more likely to be fuzzy or not consistently dark. If this study were to be replicated, I believe that print darkness, sharpness, paper quality, and inter-letter spacing should be separated so that their effects can be judged individually.

After collecting the measurable data, I looked at each book and judged how readable it appeared to me. This judgement was by far the most subjective. For a more objective study, we would need many dyslexic and non-dyslexic readers to read sections from the books to determine their readability, and base these scores on something such as time, errors, or comprehension. However, these initial judgements are not a bad place to start. In many of the cited studies, non-dyslexic and dyslexic readers found that the same text alterations made things more or less readable, and differed mainly in how big a difference it made: larger font size in O'Brien et al. (2005) and Bernard et al. (2003); larger and darker font in Rello et al. (2017); print over ebooks for Cavalli et al. (2019); and inter-letter spacing in Perea et al. (2012). This suggests that while my judgements as one adult with mild dyslexia are far from objective, they are likely approximate in terms of *comparisons* between the readabilities of the books—even though they are unlikely to predict how readable the books are for any individual reader and any individual book. Thus, using readability scores ranging from 'unreadable' to 'exceptionally readable', I compared the readability of each book to each set of data I had collected to see what correlations could be found.

There was a large variability in the formats of the books. The font size ranged from 10–14 point fonts, with three at size 10 font (15%), eight at size 11 font (40%), five at size 12 font (25%), three at size 13 font (15%), and one at size 14 font (5%). This shows that smaller font

[4] I judged font size and line spacing against Times New Roman (TNR); though the books were printed in different serif fonts, they could be judged approximately against TNR.

sizes, particularly size 11 font, are still favoured, but font sizes 12 and above are also common. An interesting difference was found between independent publishers and international publishing houses: all four books published by independent publishers had font sizes 12 and higher, while the traditional publishing houses favoured sizes 10 and 11. This may suggest that smaller publishing houses are more concerned about the readability of their text than bigger publishing houses. A larger sample of books would be required to test this hypothesis.

When it comes to comparing font size to readability, there was a correlation between larger font size and higher readability. There were six categories for readability, with three lower scores and three higher scores (Table 1).[5] With font size 10, the books ranked only in the lower scores. Font size 11 ranked seven books in the lower scores, and only one in the higher scores. In comparison, font size 12 was much more on the line—two ranked in the lower scores and three ranked in the higher scores. Font sizes 13 and 14 only ranked books in the higher scores. This suggests that font sizes 10 and 11 may be particularly inaccessible, and size 12 font is on the line of accessibility, while larger sizes like 13 and 14 should be used for higher accessibility.

Line spacing had a similar trajectory. Books with line spacings of 0.75 and 1.0 only ranked the lower scores, while 1.15 and 1.25 line spacings both had evenly split rankings. This suggests that 1.15 should be the true minimum for line spacing, rather than 1.0, or even 0.75. It may be beneficial to test out larger line spacings in books, but it seems like the difference between 1.0 and 1.15 line spacing is already significant and should be considered when books are being published.

The size of the gutter also had a positive correlation with readability. Gutters from 0.75 cm–1.25 cm all scored low, with 1.5 cm split between high and low, and 2 cm and above all ranking higher. This suggests that more white space may make books more readable. However, it should be taken into account that often (but not universally) books with greater font size often also had greater line spacing and gutters. For each of these elements to be properly tested, they would need to be tested one by one. Still, this may suggest that more readable books have more spacing on the page, as supported by Sykes' dissertation on design and readability (2008).

Finally, when it came to print clarity and page opacity, there didn't seem to be a strong correlation between higher print clarity or opacity and higher readability. 'Good' print clarity and

[5] Lower scores: 'nearly unreadable', 'low readability', and 'readable'. Higher scores: 'above average', 'very readable', and 'exceptionally readable'.

‘normal’ opacity were taken as the default, with lower scores only if they had definite flaws. It seems more likely that print clarity may push a low-readability text to be less readable, or a high-readability text to be more readable, but they are less important than font size and line spacing. Still, care should be taken when it comes to print clarity.

All in all, the results suggest that some books are already more accessible than others, but more can and should be done to make print books accessible to dyslexic adults. As a well-read dyslexic adult, my judgement of readability is likely higher than a dyslexic adult with more severe dyslexia—what falls into my ‘readable’ category may fall into ‘nearly unreadable’ for someone with more severe dyslexia. Because of that, I suggest that books should aim for ‘above average’ readability for the average reader. Doing so would make books more readable for everyone, with a more significant benefit for those with dyslexia. Judging by my rankings, 12 out of the 20 books were in the range of readable and below, while 8 were above average and above. If we assumed a dyslexic adult could only read above average and higher, and a non-dyslexic adult could read readable and higher, we would find that the dyslexic adult would find 40% of these books to be readable, while a non-dyslexic adult would find 70% of them to be readable. This discrepancy is unacceptable and should be addressed by those publishing books, both in larger publishing houses and independent publishers.

IV. Suggestions for further research

More research needs to be done to determine the effects of different text elements on the readability of print books for adult dyslexics. The ‘critical point’—the font size at which most dyslexic adults read optimally—should be found, as well as the font size at which a book becomes nearly unreadable. Due to the constraints of publishing on paper, it is unlikely that publishers will adhere to the optimal font size, but setting a new lowest font size has the potential to make print books more accessible. In addition to font size, text elements such as gutter, margins, and line spacing should also be tested extensively. Finally, the effects of paper quality and print clarity should also be tested.

When these have been determined, a system for judging the accessibility of books for dyslexic adults should be created and tested. Such a system would distinguish the text elements and find a way to quantify the effects of each on accessibility. For example, font size would be weighted as more important than print clarity, or inter-letter spacing would have a larger effect on the

accessibility score than the gutter. This would result in an objective score for the accessibility of books for dyslexia, similar to how the Australian Government has set up the Health Star Rating for food and Energy Rating Label for electrical appliances.

Creating an objective judging system would be incredibly useful in multiple situations. It could make it possible for publishers to judge their own books for accessibility, and then use the results in marketing; it could be used by online bookstores to alert readers to the readability of their print editions; and it could be used to create universal standards for book publishing. The more objective and clear we can be about what is accessible for those with dyslexia, the easier it will be for publishers to implement accessibility, and the easier it will be for readers to choose the books they purchase.

V. Suggestions for the publishing industry

What first needs to be acknowledged is this: **the readability of texts isn't only an issue of comfort, but also one of accessibility.** In other words, when a book has small or crowded text, it is not only a nuisance to most readers, but it makes the book unreadable for many people—as much as 10%–20% of the population (ADA). While research is still catching up when it comes to determining what text format dyslexic adults require, relatively minor changes could already revolutionise the accessibility of books in Australia. My suggestions are as such:

- Set the absolute minimum font size to 12, rather than size 10.
- Set the absolute minimum line spacing to 1.15, rather than 1.0.
- Increase inter-letter spacing and inter-word spacing by at least 7%.

There are already many books that follow these guidelines, in particular when it comes to font size and line spacing, so it would not be a matter of beginning a new format, but a matter of no longer using the less accessible format. This is particularly important for publishers who publish classics or academic texts, as they are more likely to use smaller font sizes and line spacing, according both to my case study and my personal experience. It is no longer the case that we can assume who will or will not read a book. As awareness grows, and more support exists for children with dyslexia, we are likely to see more adults with dyslexia reading complex books and going to university. It cannot be assumed that only those with above-average reading levels will read widely. More can and should be done to make these books, and all books, accessible to all people.

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Book Title	Author	Publisher	Edition Year	Age Target	Genre	Country of Pub.	Experiential Score
Persuasion	Jane Austen	Vintage Books (Penguin Random House)	2014	Adult	Fiction, classic	UK	Low readability
The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism	Max Weber	Penguin Classics	2002	Adult	Nonfiction, sociology, classic	US	Low readability
The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories	Leo Tolstoy	Penguin Classics	2008	Adult	Fiction, classic	UK	Low readability
The Chemistry of Tears	Peter Carey	Penguin Random House Aus.	2020	Adult	Fiction, historical + scifi	AUS	Readable, above average
The Book of Doors	Gareth Brown	Transworld Publishers (Penguin Random House)	2024	Adult	Fantasy, mystery	AUS	Readable, above average
Book Lovers	Emily Henry	Penguin Random House UK	2022	Adult	Romance	UK, printed in AUS	Readable
Six of Crows	Leigh Bardugo	Orion Children's Books (Hachette)	2016	YA	Fantasy	UK, printed in AUS	Low readability
Fledgling	Octavia E. Butler	Hachette	2022	Adult	Scifi horror	US	Readable
Yellowface	Rebecca F. Kuang	The Borough Press (Harper Collins)	2023	Adult	Fiction, dark comedy	UK, printed in AUS	Very readable
Boy Swallows Universe	Trent Dalton	Fourth Estate (Harper Collins)	2019	Adult	Historical fiction	Australia	Readable
Babel	Rebecca F. Kuang	Harper Collins	2023	Adult	Historical fiction, fantasy	US	Low readability
Tom Lake	Ann Patchett	Harper Collins	2023	Adult	Fiction, romance	UK, printed in AUS	Readable, above average
The Portrait of a Lady	Henry James	Macmillan Collector's Library	2018	Adult	Fiction, classic	UK, printed in China	Nearly unreadable
The Mountain in the Sea	Ray Nayler	Macmillan Publishing	2023	Adult	Scifi fantasy	US	Readable
The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes	Suzanne Collins	Scholastic Australia	2023	YA	Dystopian	AUS	Readable
The Australian Editing Handbook	Flan, Hill & Wang	John Wiley & Sons Australia	2014	Adult	Reference	AUS	Readable
The Signal Line	Brendan Colley	Transit Lounge Publishing	2022	Adult	Supernatural, fiction	AUS	Readable, above average
Ghostlines	Nick Gadd	Arden (Australian Scholarly Publishing)	2020	Adult	Crime, mystery	AUS	Exceptionally readable
Revenge	S. L. Lim	Transit Lounge Publishing	2020	Adult	Thriller, LGBTQ	AUS	Readable, above average
The Puzzle Solver	Tracie White	Allen & Unwin	2021	Adult	Nonfiction, medical mystery	AUS	Very readable

Book Title	Experiential Score	Font Size	Line Spacing	Gutter (cm)	Top (cm)	Bottom (cm)	Side (cm)	Print Clarity	Page Opacity (normal, poor)
Persuasion	Low readability	11	1.15	1.25	1.75	2	1.25	Good	Normal
The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism	Low readability	10	1	1	1.25	2.5	1.25	Okay	Normal
The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories	Low readability	11	1	1	1.5	2	1.5	Okay	Normal
The Chemistry of Tears	Readable, above average	11	1.25	1.5	2	2	1.5	Good	Normal
The Book of Doors	Readable, above average	13	1.15	1	2.25	2	2	Good	Normal
Book Lovers	Readable	11	1.25	1	2	1.5	1.5	Good	Normal
Six of Crows	Low readability	12	1	1	1.25	2.25	1.5	Poor (grey and blury)	Poor
Fledgling	Readable	10	1.15	1	2.5	1.5	1.5	Good	Normal
Yellowface	Very readable	12	1.25–1.4	2	2.75	3	2	Good	Poor
Boy Swallows Universe	Readable	11	1.25	1	2	1.5	1.5	Good	Normal
Babel	Low readability	11	1	1.5	1.75	2	1.75	Good	Poor
Tom Lake	Readable, above average	12	1.15	1.75	2.5	2.5	2.25	Good	Normal
The Portrait of a Lady	Nearly unreadable	10	0.75	0.75	1	1.5	1	Good	Poor
The Mountain in the Sea	Readable	12	1.15	2	2	2.25	2.25	Poor (turns grey)	Normal
The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes	Readable	11	1.25	1.25	1.75	2.75	1.75	Good	Poor
The Australian Editing Handbook	Readable	11	1	2	2	1.5	4.5	Good	Normal
The Signal Line	Readable, above average	13	1.25	1.5	2.75	2.75	2.25	Poor (blury and grey)	Normal
Ghostlines	Exceptionally readable	12	1.25	2	2	2.5	2	Exceptional	Exceptional
Revenge	Readable, above average	13	1.15	2	3	2	2.5	Okay (Clear but grey)	Normal
The Puzzle Solver	Very readable	14	1.25	2	2.75	2.25	2.25	Good	Normal