

Considering Accessible Text Formatting and Layout Design in Print Format Children's Publishing

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Introduction & Context

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Graduation requirements include a final research paper (our program's equivalent of a thesis) on a publishing topic of our choosing.

I researched accessibility in print children's publishing.

This presentation will introduce my research as an invitation to this important topic.



Summary

This project combines research on accessible text formatting and layout design for children's publishing with multiple case studies to exemplify accessible title text formatting and layout simplicity for intentional accessible children's book design.

Inspiration for Research

While I was in grad school I worked as the Format Editor for the Graduate School; this role, in combination with my publishing coursework, prompted me to take an interest in formatting.

Compared to other categories of publishing, the design process for children's books is unique: it must accommodate visual aids or stylistic choices, as well as a low word count. So factors such as font size, line spacing, or text placement vary.

Notably, these same factors are also taken into consideration when designing for accessibility.

This overlap sparked my curiosity into researching text formatting and layout design in these contexts.

Why Children's Publishing?

I was first inspired by a children's book I saw once that was atypically formatted.

Children's books are a prime candidate for accessible design, as the category is inherently more flexible by nature of the content.

This category is also in a unique position of publishing where the audience is still new to using the product; they are learning to read.

Accessible accommodations are designed to aid reading; the target audience of children's books can **all** benefit from reading support.

This is a core aspect of accessibility: accommodations made are beneficial beyond a target audience.

Narrowing Focus

Recent accessibility efforts are focused on digital mediums. But young readers still learn with print books, too.

While the efforts toward accessible adult titles are not to be dismissed, early intervention is crucial.

Given the time constraints of my research, I chose to limit scope to accommodations centered on dyslexia.

Dyslexia-friendly accessibility efforts echo the idea of benefitting a larger audience.

A Descriptive Approach

For this project, I focused on what is already happening in print format accessible publishing, featuring current examples.

The goal was to understand why certain formatting or design choices are made, what the motivations are behind these accommodations, what making something accessible actually looks like in this context, etc.

That is the start to then consider bridging the gap—though that is a more involved endeavor.

Early Reader Benefits

The project began by looking into what design choices aid reading comprehension in young readers, in general. Some of these include

- Overcrowding is distracting
- Simple layout is ideal
- Spread out the text and illustrations
- Utilize negative space
- Create a visual hierarchy
- Use clear and easy fonts

These elements are similar to accommodations made with an accessible mindset.

This overlap in adjusted formatting makes clear the benefits beyond the intended audience.

Typography and Dyslexia-Specific Fonts

I knew going into this project of the existence of dyslexia-focused fonts.

Specific fonts are designed to be dyslexia-friendly, such as Dyslexie and EasyReading.

What I found in comparing multiple studies, is that these fonts are not what makes the difference. Instead, it is the **spacing** featured in them.

And when similar spacing was applied to typical fonts, studies saw similar levels of improvement.

In fact, the negative effects of unfriendly fonts were eliminated by introducing better spacing.

So the problematic aspects of current fonts are fixable problems, without requiring the use of an entirely new font (as that new font may not necessarily resolve the issue, either).

However, the fonts are not detrimental. Instead, though, there are better avenues to focus on.

Current State

Some publishers have already begun publishing accessible titles—either new, dyslexia-friendly titles, or versions of their current titles updated with accessibility in mind.

Bloomsbury introduced dyslexia-friendly adult titles recently, in October 2024.

This was a passion project by employees in an effort to reach those who find reading challenging.

Why is why turning these efforts to children's literature is monumental: the entire audience of children's literature finds reading a challenge. They are new to it!

What does this actually look like?

For **fonts**, accessibility may look like larger font sizes, sans serif font choices, specific spacing between the letters to ensure each individual letter stands out, as well as a similar process for not just individual letters but entire words, and a preference for bolding over italics or underlining.

Line spacing translates to extra negative space between lines, as well as around headings and between paragraphs. Even spacing between words is ideal, as well as using white space to group related content and remove clutter near text.

Additionally, **text formatting** can include the color contrast of the text and its background. Single color backgrounds are recommended, avoiding patterns or distracting surroundings, as well as sufficient contrast levels between background and text.

In essence: avoiding overcrowding.

Case Studies

The case studies included in this project are distinctly individual in representing accessible accommodations efforts.

Varying in location, size, and specialization, these atypical publishers together provide a noteworthy demonstration of what accessibility can look like in print format children's publishing.

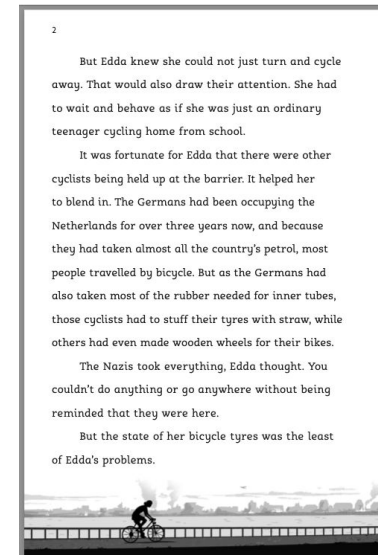
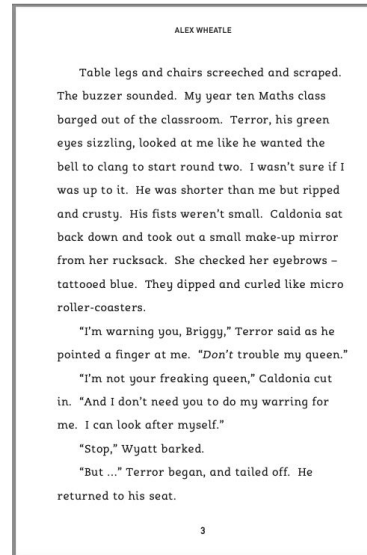
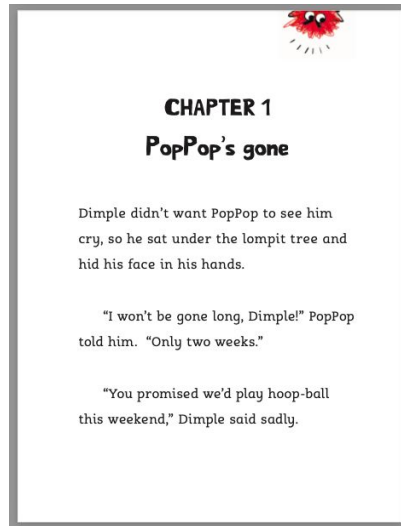
However, these case studies were also selected because they are some of the few examples available.

These outliers demonstrate the **lack** of accessible print format children's publishing.

They signify the skewed efforts towards accessibility, as evidence is found only in these smaller or specialized entities taking it upon themselves.

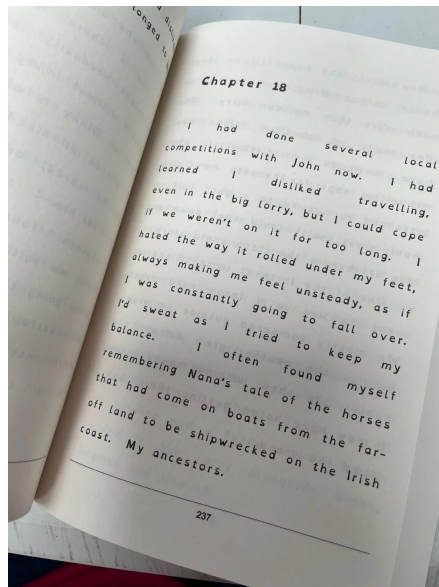
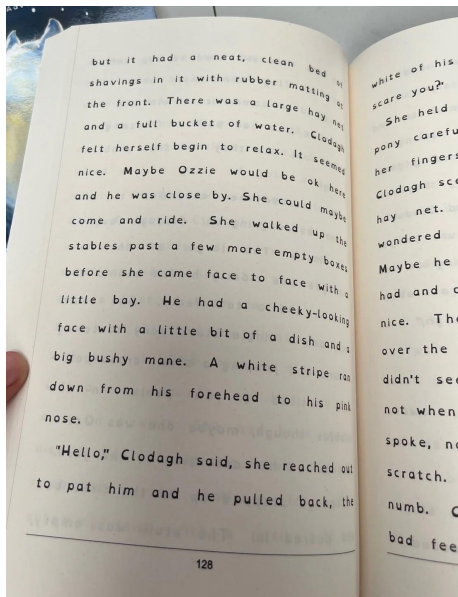
Primary Case Study: Barrington Stoke

- Barrington Stoke, imprint of UK publisher Collins
- a line of specifically dyslexia-friendly fiction titles
- “unique, dyslexia-friendly font”
- “accessible layouts and spacing” to avoid overcrowding



Secondary Case Study: Author Elaine Heney

- self-publishing Irish equestrian author
- website features a tab for dyslexia-friendly books



- “special dyslexia friendly editions”
- utilize “a font called 'Open Dyslexic',”
- “more spacing between the lines”
- and they “contain more pages than the standard edition”

Tertiary Case Study: Royal Fireworks Press

- Independent publishing company
- known for producing titles for gifted children
- font size, margins, and both line spacing and length
- minimizing the amount of text per page

Lately, the king had given governors the right to pardon pirates if they agreed to give up piracy. Some of the pirates took this offer because they were afraid of being hanged if they were caught. Under the king's pardon, many of them were leaving the sea. But the worst of the pirates went right on with their robbing and killing.

One of the most feared pirates of all was a man named Blackbeard. In May of 1718, Blackbeard's four ships were in the Charles Town harbor, and no ship was safe.

In Summary

This descriptive study of the current state of accessible design in children's print formatting, utilizing case studies to exemplify pioneers in the field, demonstrates how to approach typography through an accessible lens.

The choice to focus on children's print formatting was twofold:

- In an increasingly digital landscape, accessible print design is not as prevalent.

- Accessibility at the early stages of development is crucial.

- Children's books have a built-in potential of an inherently flexible design.

- Plus benefits for a wider population beyond the target audience.

This research is only an introduction to accessible typography in children's print formatting, and future research would involve expanding to consider paper color, trim size, and limitations and feasibility of print and production.

An Introduction and Invitation to Accessible Publishing

This project aimed not to enforce accessible standards, but to prompt consideration of them.

By looking at how the elements of formatting and layout design are utilized to aid readers with print disabilities, that knowledge can be taken into consideration moving forward, with the potential for more widespread application.

As these elements are already taken into consideration as stages in the design process, there is a built-in potential for another layer: considering these elements through an additional lens of accessibility.

Ultimately, understanding the reasoning behind accommodations, the difference in why one title is accessible and another is not, and what could be changed to make it so, is what could make the difference in bridging the gap.

Thank you!

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