Removing Obstacles to Easy Reading

Carol Sanders Reiner

Recommended Citation

Removing Obstacles to Easy Reading

Abstract

A review of Removing Obstacles to Easy Reading by David Fisk in *Technical Communication*.

"Removing Obstacles to Easy Reading" by David Fisk, in *Technical Communication, Vol. 41*, No. 2. (Second Quarter, May 1994), Society for Technical Communication, 815 Fifteenth St. N.W., Washington DC 20005, pp. 269-275.

As baby boomers reach maturity and people remain professionally and intellectually active longer, audiences with impaired abilities to read are growing rapidly. Some 76 million baby boomers are now reaching the age where vision begins to decline.

People with disabilities are a growing part of the writer's audience. The Federal Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that employers make reasonable accommodations to eliminate discrimination in hiring, advancing, training, compensating, and discharging employees with physical or mental disabilities.

This article points out changes that should be made now in the way we communicate with these audiences via the printed word and the computer. Many of the adaptations required to meet the needs of an aging audience are relatively straight forward and do not require drastic changes in how print materials are prepared.

Fisk discusses what writers should consider in order to not frustrate readers—visual problems, mental ability, motor control, and the problem of adapting text to the mental processing characteristics of older people. He also discusses improving computer procedures for physically impaired people.

Some of Fisk's specific recommendations address simple rules of format and organization. For example, he advocates indenting paragraphs, separating columns with rules, and limiting column widths to 4 inches optimally, plus or minus 1 1/4 inches, if necessary. Fisk also recommends that wherever possible: comprehensive information should appear in a single volume; objectives should be listed preceding the main text to cue the reader; and important items in the text should be explicitly identified, textually and typographically, with bold face and special symbols to flag important points.

Other recommendations address the specific obstacles of specific groups. In consideration of the visually impaired, he suggests changing the standard print type from the current 10 point to 12 point type and using paper with dull (matte) finish instead of coated or shiny paper, which may cause distracting light reflections. To facilitate mental processing, he recommends a quick reference card approach to texts over multi-volumes, and the use of exercises and workbooks that encourage the mental involvement of the reader and serve as a review of important concepts.

Taking into account the processing patterns of older readers, Fisk reminds us that publication layout and typography should reflect the organization and functionality of the material. In other words, instructions for using a feature should be near its description and should not refer the reader to an appendix, another section, or another book. This way visually impaired readers will not have to flip through pages, constantly focusing and refocusing their vision or possibly removing and replacing reading glasses.

Finally, Fisk makes recommendations that address technology. He points out that programs should allow the user to choose screen colors, because amber-colored screens are preferable over green and blue colored screens for many visually impaired people. Fisk also maintains that monitors should have adjustable viewing angles, and he reminds us that some software special effects, such as printing over patterned or gray backgrounds, cause problems.

Fisk demonstrates that removing barriers enhances overall usability. Certainly we want this in our information delivery systems.

Carol Sanders Reiner
Cooperative Extension Service
University of Arkansas, Little Rock