Concept

F-shaped reading pattern

A screen scanning pattern: the eyes sweep across the top, then across a somewhat shorter line, and then down the left margin, leaving much of the text unread.



In Spanish
Lectura en F

Origin
Nielsen (2006), with eyetracking; revisited by Pernice (2017)

What problem it addresses

It explains why people miss important information on a page even when it's written there. Content design takes from it the idea that writing something isn't enough: you have to put it where the eyes go.

An example

The same page of requirements for a scholarship, in two formats.

A block of text



Long paragraphs with no headings: the eyes sweep the first lines and move down the left. **The deadline, on the right, goes unnoticed.**

With headings and lists



Headings that start with the key word, the deadline at the top, and the requirements in a list. **The eyes find what they're looking for.**

The F shape isn't a rule to follow, but a sign that the text doesn't help people scan.

Why it happens

1 

Reading on screen is tiring and people want to finish their task quickly.

2 

If nothing guides the eyes, they read the beginning and move down the first words of each line.

3 

What's on the right and lower down gets lost, and the person doesn't know they missed it.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Put the most important points in the first two paragraphs, and start headings, links, and bullets with the words that carry the information.

✗ Avoid

Designing pages "in an F shape" on purpose: the goal is that people don't have to read that way.

👁 Don't fall for it

Whenever the screen width changes, check which words end up at the start of each line: that's where the eyes land.

79%

Scan

Read it all

What the research says

Of the people in a study by Morkes and Nielsen, 79% always scanned new pages; only 16% read word by word (Nielsen, 1997).

●●● **Solid evidence.** The F shape was seen by eyetracking 232 people (Nielsen, 2006), and in 2017 it still appeared, on phones too (Pernice, 2017). Almost all the evidence comes from Nielsen Norman Group.

Connections

Used in

- Web design
- UX writing

Related to

- Progressive disclosure
- Visual hierarchy

Authors and works

1997	**John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen**	Found that most people scan web pages instead of reading them.
2006	**Jakob Nielsen**	Described the F shape from eyetracking 232 people as they looked at thousands of pages.
2017	**Kara Pernice**	Confirmed that the pattern still held, explained when it appears (unformatted text, haste, low interest), and placed it among other scanning patterns, such as the “layer-cake” pattern.

Sources

Original sources

- Nielsen, J. (2006, April 17). F-shaped pattern for reading web content. Alertbox. Nielsen Norman Group.
- Nielsen, J. (1997, October 1). How users read on the web. Alertbox. Nielsen Norman Group.

Academic reviews

- Pernice, K. (2017, November 12). F-shaped pattern of reading on the web: Misunderstood, but still relevant (even on mobile). Nielsen Norman Group. View source (https://nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/)

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