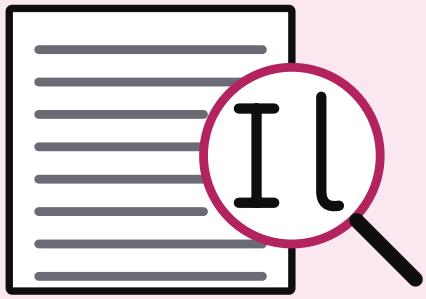
Concept

# Legibility and readability

Legibility is how easy it is to tell each letter apart. Readability is how comfortable it is to read continuous text, depending on size, line length, spacing and contrast.



In Spanish
*Legibilidad y lecturabilidad*

Origin
Tinker (1963); the distinction, Tracy (1986)

## What problem it addresses

It explains why a very clear typeface can still make a text hard going. Design takes from it that both the letters and the way the text is set need care.

## An example

The same text, in the same clear typeface, set in two ways.

### Cramped



Small type, very long lines and almost no space between them. **Every letter is clear, but reading is tiring.**

### With room



Larger type, shorter lines and more space between them. **It reads smoothly.**

The typeface is just as legible in both cases. What changes is readability: how the text is set.

## Why it happens

1 

**First we recognize letters.** If two look too alike, like a capital I and a lowercase l, we hesitate.

2 

**Then we follow lines.** If they are very long or too close together, we lose our place.

3 

**Both add up.** A clear typeface badly set is tiring too.

## Applications in design

### ✓ Use it like this

Choose a typeface with clearly distinct shapes, then set the text for reading: a large enough size, lines that are not too long and space between them.

### ✗ Avoid

Shrinking the type or lengthening the lines to fit more text.

### Don't fall for it

A typeface reading well in a headline proves nothing: test it in a long paragraph, at the real size and on the real screen.

# 0.2° to 2°

### What the research says

This is the range of print sizes, measured by the angle the x-height takes up, at which people read at top speed. Newspapers and novels, at 40 cm, sit just above the minimum: about 0.23° (Legge and Bigelow, 2011).

●●● **Solid evidence.** The range spans a factor of ten and sums up many studies with normally sighted readers. Legge and Bigelow compared it with measurements of real books and newspapers.

## Connections

Used in

- Accessible design
- Type design
- Typography

Related to

- Plain language

## Authors and works

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1963 | **Miles A. Tinker** | Brought together more than thirty years of experiments on how type size, line length and leading change reading speed. |
| 1986 | **Walter Tracy** | Separated the two terms: legibility is recognizing each character without hesitation; readability, being able to read for a long time without strain. |
| 2011 | **Gordon E. Legge and Charles A. Bigelow** | Joined vision science and typography to show that common print sizes fall where reading is fastest. |

## Sources


### Original sources

- Tracy, W. (1986). Letters of credit: A view of type design. David R. Godine.
- Tinker, M. A. (1963). Legibility of print. Iowa State University Press.

### Academic reviews

- Legge, G. E., & Bigelow, C. A. (2011). Does print size matter for reading? A review of findings from vision science and typography. Journal of Vision, 11(5), 8, 1–22. View source (https://doi.org/10.1167/11.5.8)


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