Typography in Children's Books

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Are children influenced in their choice of book by the typeface? Do children need special typefaces? Are some typefaces better in helping children learn to read? Sue Walker explores.

One of my favourite books for children is *I Will Not Ever Never Eat a Tomato* by Lauren Child. The story is compelling, and the pictures enchanting, but the typography is not what you would expect: the letters vary in size and shape, some lines are straight, and others meander across the page. Young children love this: those who cannot yet read pick out the letters; those who can love the variation and delight at being able to cope with it. It suggests that children have a very broad tolerance when it comes to letterforms for reading. But are some typefaces better in helping children learn to read? Do children need special typefaces? If publishers want to use a special typeface, is it a good idea and what options are there?

The Typographic Design for Children project at The University of Reading has studied the extent to which typography influences children's choice of book. It has looked, in particular, at what children thought about particular typefaces and how they described them, and whether they noticed and could describe variations in letter, word and line spacing. Part of the work considered whether typefaces that had been designed with the perceived needs of children in mind were in fact helpful.

**Receptivity to variation**

We prepared specially designed books using the text and illustrations from *A Sheepless Night*. We set the pages in serif, sans serif, script and informal typefaces, with and without infant characters. Some examples are shown below and on the right. Some tests measured performance and others considered children's preferences. The performance tests asked questions such as: are serif or sans serif types easier or more difficult to read? Do children find infant characters (eg variants of ?a? and ?g?) easier or more difficult to read?

One test compared Century (a serif type) and Gill Sans (a sans serif type) set with and without infant characters, and a second compared Gill with infant characters with Sassoon Primary Infant, Flora and Fabula. Our recordings of children reading were subject to miscue analysis, but there were no significant differences, statistically, between the various typefaces which indicates that the children in this relatively small sample (48 children) were indeed receptive to considerable variation in letterforms.

However, their reasons for preferring particular typefaces helped to identify some typographic factors that may influence children's motivation to read. It was evident that children make judgements about the appearance of text and that associations can be strong. They described the ?character? of a typeface using words such as ?brighter? or ?faster? suggesting how motivation and appeal might be affected by typeface. Certain typefaces were perceived as being ?grown-up?, ?foreign?, ?babyish?, ?funny? and ?silly?. Such associations may have a negative effect on motivation to read. The children also had views on the appropriateness of particular typefaces: some found that even when they thought a
typeface was attractive, they thought it was not suitable for use in a reading book; for example, one girl said of French Script ?I can't read it very well but I like the look of it?. Some features of letters were thought to be distracting if they are too noticeable, as suggested by the words ?curly?, ?loopy?, ?wiggly writing?.

Some children also thought that different typefaces made the text look bigger or smaller, thicker or thinner, more squashed or spread out. Darker and thicker typefaces such as Gill, Century and Fabula were also perceived by some children as being ?easier?. ?Lighter?, ?smaller? and ?thinner? were used to describe letters in Flora, Lucida and French Script, and perceived by some as being ?difficult?. Flora and French Script were thought to be harder because they were ?curved? or ?fancy?.

**Different forms of a and g**

The children's comments about infant and non-infant a's and g's suggested that their views can be just as valid as adults?. A widely-held assumption (by teachers and parents) is that infant characters are appropriate for beginner readers because the forms correspond to those that children write. Many teachers, for example, think that sans serif types (with infant characters) are suitable for beginner readers and publishers respond to this by setting books in typefaces such as Helvetica and Frutiger, often with specially designed infant characters. We wanted to hear what children thought about this. Most children in our study were well aware that there were different forms of a and g, and some even made the point that a is what we write and a is what we read. Some thought that a and g were ?harder? than a and g, but this did not affect their reading performance in our tests. Some commented favourably about what they perceived as the ?normal? ?g? used in Gill Schoolbook. One child made particularly detailed comments:

Century and Gill are both kind of the same. No, they're not. You see ?reading?? Look at that ?a? then look at that ?a?? they are not the same looking. Look at that ?g? and then look at that ?g??. I like ?g? best. If you look at the ?y? and you look at that ?y? they're not the same. The ?y? is like a ?u?? but it goes down and is a bit curvey. But if you look at the ?y? it goes straight down.

**Specially-designed typefaces**

Some typefaces have been designed with the perceived needs of children in mind; these may include infant a's and g's, and also other specially-designed characters, for example, variant forms of y, k, t, l and some numbers. Sassoon Primary, Fabula, and most recently Read Regular have caught the eyes of publishers eager to produce child-friendly books. Both Sassoon and Fabula were designed specially for young children, and some characteristics, such as long ascenders, clearly distinguishable characters and a friendly ?feel? may be important qualities to look for in other typefaces. Read Regular is the latest in line held to be particularly suitable and helpful for children. It was originally designed to help dyslexic readers by differentiating between easily-confused characters. Of these typefaces (and there are other ?schoolbook fonts?), Read is perhaps the least successful. Though care has been taken to distinguish between the sometimes confused ?b? and ?d?, the distinction is subtle, and arguably more successfully achieved in Sassoon and Fabula. Read has short descending letters (relative to the x-height) and this increases similarity between an infant ?g? and ?a? and small letter ?o??. Such distinctions are more clearly made in Sassoon and in Fabula? indeed in Fabula, the non-infant a is standard in order to accentuate the difference between ?o?, ?a? and ?g?. Although both Sassoon and Fabula were designed by experts in letterforms and type (and in both cases with feedback from children), they do nevertheless not have the overall appearance of a conventional book typeface. If one of the purposes of teaching children to read is to familiarise them with the typographic conventions of reading, then specially-designed typefaces may not be the answer. Selecting established typefaces that have generous ascenders and descenders, clear distinction between characters that are sometimes confused, and no quirky or unusual characters might be an equally good approach to typeface selection. There are many typefaces that have these characteristics and choosing such typefaces might be a more appropriate solution to helping children become familiar with the conventions of ?grown up reading?.

**Space between letters, words and lines**

Typography, of course, is about much more than typefaces. The way in which typefaces are used ? the spaces between
the words and the lines is equally important. A second series of studies carried out at Reading asked children what they thought about different degrees of space between letters, words and lines. Like the typefaces studies, the test materials used *A Sheepless Night* and were of high quality in terms of production. Some of the pages we produced went to extremes and would never be used in practice, but we wanted to be able to push children’s tolerances. They described differences in terms of level of difficulty, for example, 17 out of 24 children in one of the tests thought that the very tight letter spacing was the most difficult to read; in the word spacing test tight word spacing was described as having small space, big writing and is easier to read? though other children thought that the very wide setting was the easiest?the words are wide apart and easiest to read?. The children also perceived differences in size and texture, and some thought that text with narrow word spacing was bigger, darker, thicker and blacker than text set with wider spacing. The normal and wide settings used in our test material for word spacing was thought to be normal?, whereas the narrow spacing was described as funny? and not how words should look?.

Children described perceptions of space between the lines as differences in size, weight of type, ease of content and quantity of text suggesting that they may not have been consciously aware of line spacing but that it did affect their perception of a text. What we called ?wide? and ?normal? line space, for example, was thought to be the ?easiest? to read; the ?close? and ?very close? setting were both described as having more text than the ?normal? and ?wide? settings.

Our tests, using the *Sheepless Night* books, indicated that children can be very tolerant of a range of typographic variants. In practice, some of the extreme versions with very close or very wide letter, word and line spacing would never be used. However, children’s ability to cope with such extremes, albeit in a test situation, suggests that focusing on very particular issues, such as whether serif or sans serif type is best?, or whether ?a?s and ?g?s should be single or double-storey, may not be as relevant as once thought.

Children?s views, based on their perceptions of levels of difficulty, and their thoughts about particular typefaces and their use were useful in trying to establish what typographic features are helpful in reading books. To date the following points have emerged. Motivation to read can be affected by typefaces children think are inappropriate for a reading book, or too distinctive. Children in our sample used the word ?normal? to describe Century, Gill and Fabula suggesting they thought these typefaces were suitable. Many children spoke of ?reading a?s? and ?writing a?s? suggesting they were well aware of the difference in shape between single and double-storey forms. Though some children perceived a and g as ?harder? than x and x, it did not affect their motivation to read. Letter, word or line spacing that was very narrow was thought by many children in our sample to make text seem more difficult.

Most important, the children in our sample presented wide-ranging and articulate views which suggest that it is unlikely that one style/kind of typography will suit every child. Discussion of typographic attributes ? the typeface and the space between the letters, words and lines ? should, however, be a significant element in helping children choose a book.

Sue Walker is Head of the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication at The University of Reading and author of *The Songs the Letters Sing: Typography and Children?s Reading*, part of the Typographic Design for Children project (see www.kidstype.org for more information). The work is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

The *Songs the Letters Sing*, 0 7049 9846 7, is available from the National Centre for Language and Literacy, University of Reading, Bulmershe Court, Reading RG6 1HY at £5.95, cheques payable to The University of Reading. Website: www.ncll.org.uk

*I Will Not Ever Never Eat a Tomato* by Lauren Child is published by Orchard.

*A Sheepless Night* by Geraldine McCaughrean, illustrated by Mike Spoor, is part of the Oxford Literacy Web, Stage 6.