

# How to support people with dyslexia to use your library: it's more than Readers Advisory and Hi-Lo books

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*10% of the population is dyslexic. Libraries may not appear to be places that are open to people with dyslexia and it is difficult for staff to know what books to recommend, or what books in their collection might be suitable. However libraries do have items in their collections that are dyslexia friendly and e-books platforms that can be modified for people with dyslexia. This presentation seeks to share Librarians what dyslexia is, how to identify books in their own collections that are dyslexia friendly, how to modify e-books to suit the individual needs of these customers, and how to empower customers and their whanau to accomplish these activities themselves.*

*Note: The work on which this paper is based has been done supporting children and their parents/carers to find appropriate books, and therefore are referred to as such. However the printed page characteristics to look for and method of support described below may be appropriate for adults with dyslexia.*

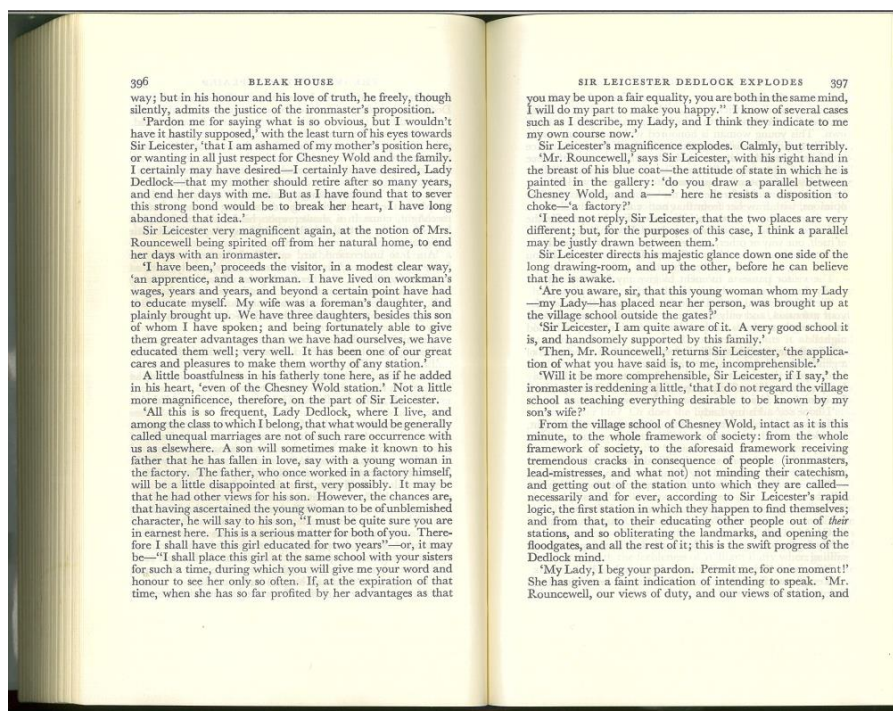
## Introduction

It is estimated that 1 in 10 people in New Zealand experiences dyslexia (Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand, 2009). What does it mean to be dyslexic? A definition of dyslexia used in a recent New Zealand government enquiry is “an unexpected or persistent difficulty in learning to read, write and spell that cannot be explained by other factors” (Education and Science Committee, 2014–2017, p. 15).

The other factors can include socioeconomic status, cultural background, other diagnoses of learning disabilities and ill health leading to long absences from school.

One of the more famous symptoms of dyslexia is that of “words moving on the page,” and it is one that is most relevant to Librarians. A powerful illustration of the dynamic nature of this symptom is provided by Victor Windell’s (2016) “Dsxylea” Dyslexia simulation. It is a web-based program that has words and letters moving, changing and switching on and off in a page text. There are other ways that people with dyslexia see words on a page. Google provides a number of different images.

With this in mind, reading the page of text from Dickens’ (1948) *Bleak House* shown below will be effortful and difficult if the words and letters are moving.



From *Bleak House* (pp. 396–397), by C. Dickens, 1948, London, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

It will take a lot of sensory and precognitive processing before sense of the words can be made and before Dickens' beautiful prose and lyrical descriptions of a London fog in the 19th Century can be decoded.

This means that any child, identifying as dyslexic, wanting to find a book for in a library might not have had a good experience with a book. They may not be able to answer the question "tell me about a book you have read that you liked" or the sometimes easier question "tell me about a book that you didn't like?" Therefore a normal reader's advisory interview cannot continue.

There are hi-lo books such as those published by Barrington Stoke in England that are specifically designed for people with dyslexia or reluctant readers, and whilst they are a very useful addition to any collection, there are downsides to this type of book

- Not all libraries have them.
- At Christchurch City Libraries their issues figures are low and therefore do not appear popular (L. McDonald, personal communication, August 2016).
- They are still a 'special book' and therefore can be stigmatizing for these children.
- Some parents see these books as the only books for their children and so ignore the rest of the library's collection.

The entire library collection can be opened up to a child with dyslexia by looking for one to all of the following four characteristics on a page of any book that a child may choose.

- 1.5 line spacing
- Left justified, right ragged
- Sans serif font
- Not white pages

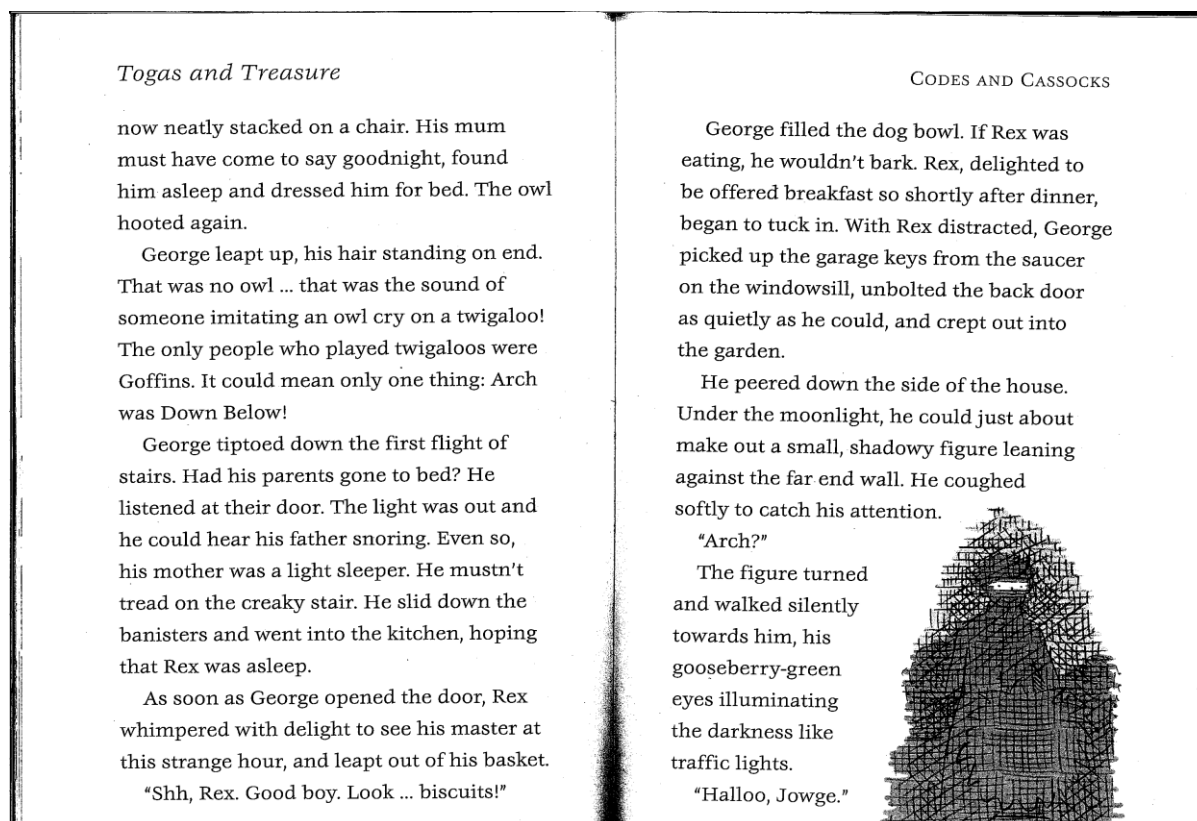
These characteristics are some of those suggested by the British Dyslexia Association (n.d.) in their *Dyslexia Style Guide* as best practice for producing dyslexia friendly text.

Examples of each are as follows below.

## Line Spacing

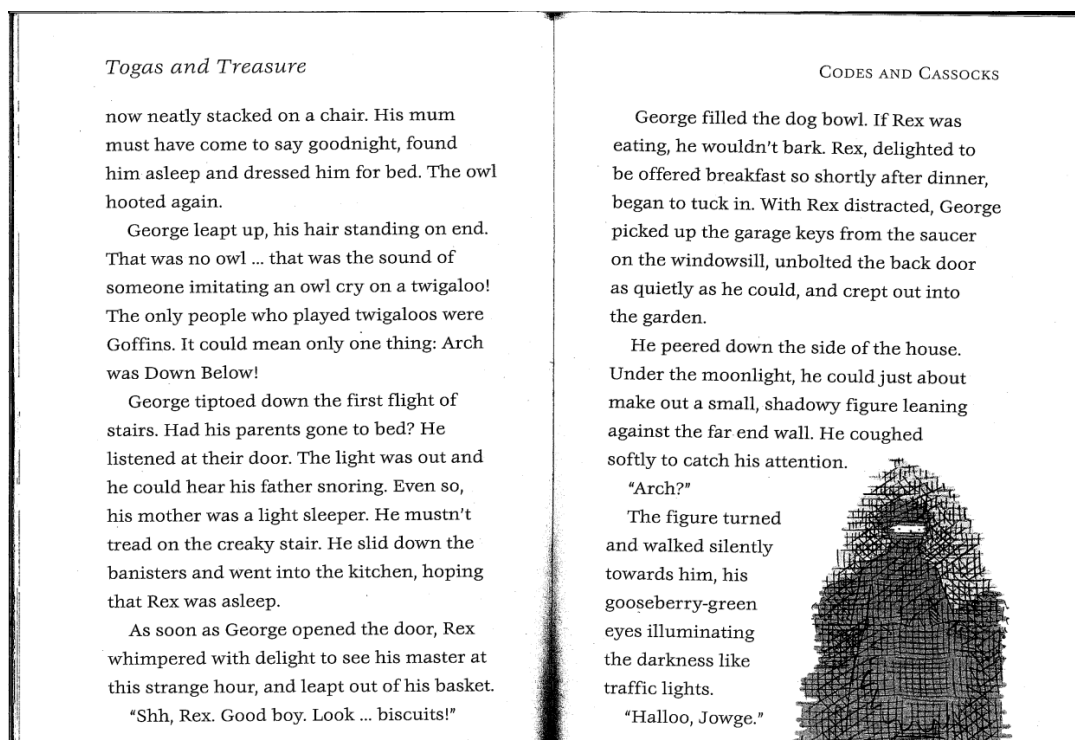
From *Snow Sister* (p. xx), by E. Carroll, 2015, London, United Kingdom: Faber & Faber.

Increasing the space between lines appears to separate the words and decrease words moving on a page.

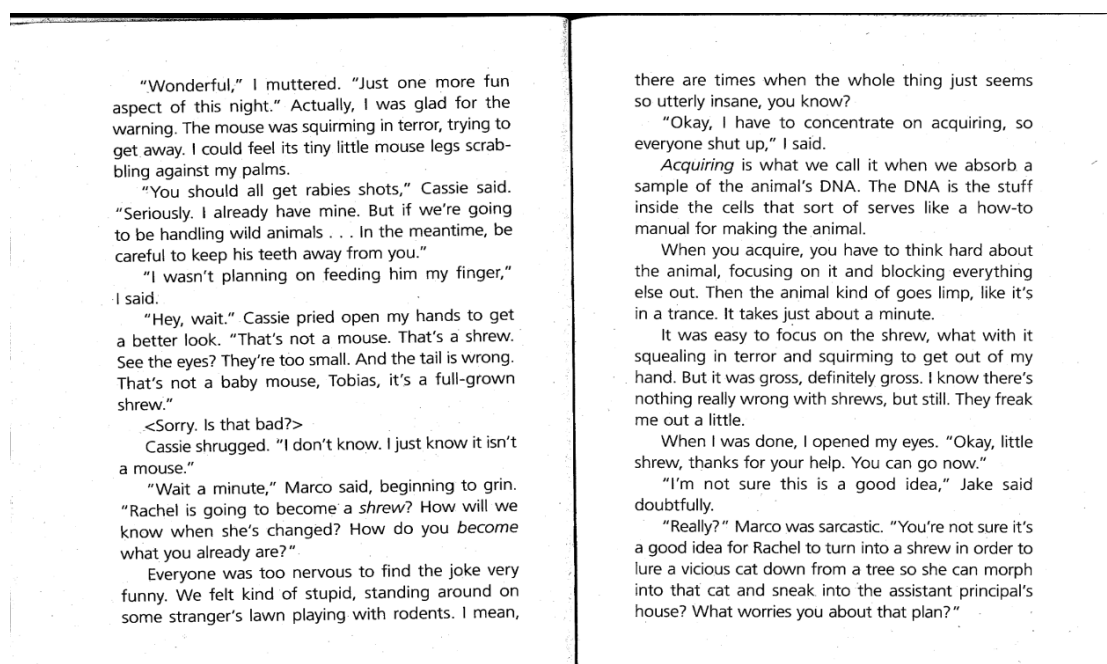


## Left Justified, Right Ragged

From *The Goffins: Togas and Treasure* (p. xx), by J. Willis, 2011, London, United Kingdom: Walker. This gives 'contour's to the page, therefore showing where a reader has been and where to go next.



## Sans Serif Fonts



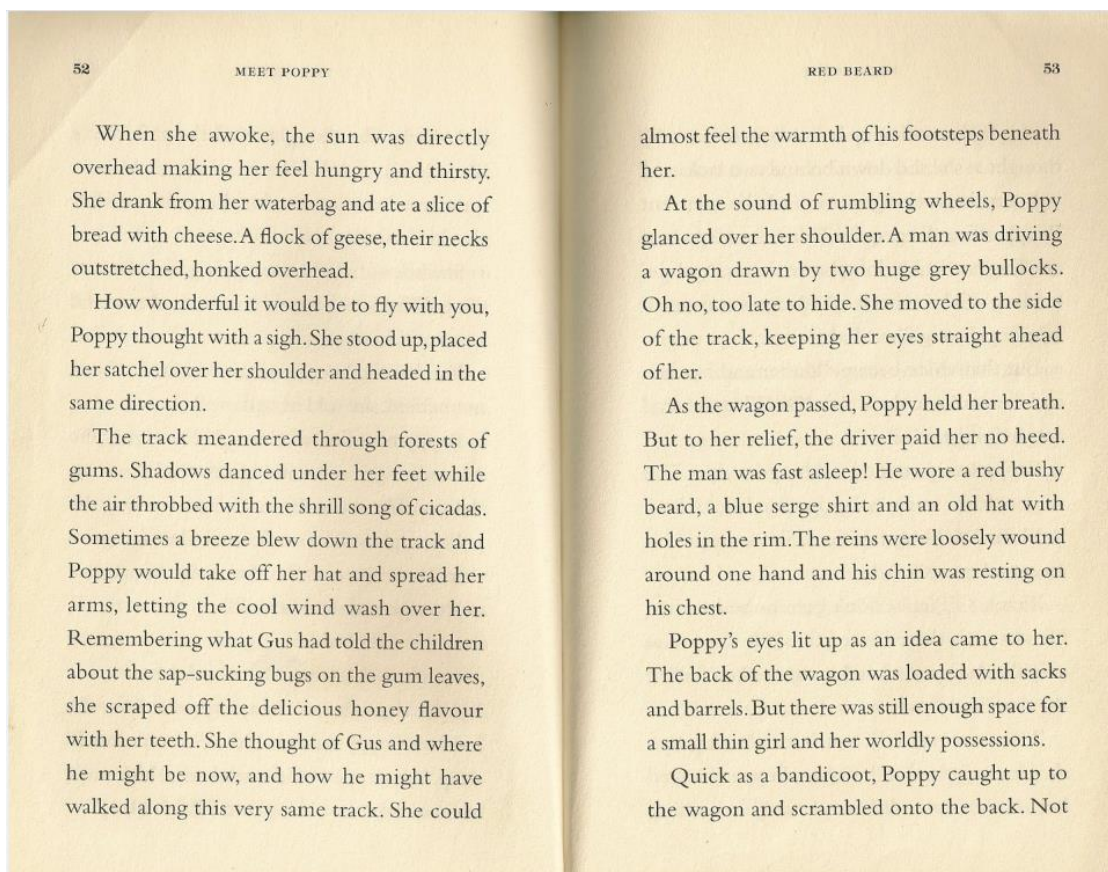
From *Animorphs: The Visitor* (pp. 54–55), by K. A. Applegate, 2011, New York, NY: Scholastic.

Sans serif fonts remove all the non-information carrying elements from the letters, and so decreases the processing that the brain has to do before the words can be identified.

There are special fonts designed for people with dyslexia, such as "Dyslexie;" however, how much these help these help is not clear. One recent study found that it was the spacing between the letters that was the critical factor (Marinus et al., 2016). The space between letters is not something discussed here.



## Not White Pages



From *Meet Poppy* (pp. 52–53), by G. Wang and L. Masciullo, 2011, Camberwell, Australia: Puffin.

The black of print and the white of the paper on a normal page is the biggest visual contrast for the brain to process. If the colour of the paper is changed to cream that contrast is decreased and the amount of processing the reader has to do is therefore decreased too.

Irlen syndrome may sound similar; however, it is not what is being discussed here.

If all these characteristics are added to one page of text, it will go from this

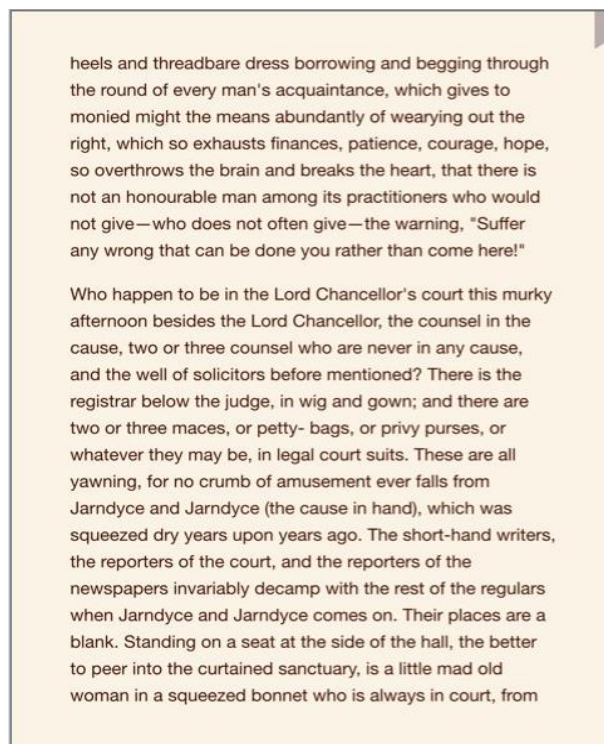
Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds this day in the sight of heaven and earth.

On such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here—as here he is—with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains, addressed by a large advocate with great whiskers, a little voice, and an interminable brief, and outwardly directing his contemplation to the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog. On such an afternoon some score of members of the High Court of Chancery bar ought to be—as here they are—mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running their goat-hair and horsehair warded heads against walls of words and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might. On such an afternoon the various solicitors in the cause, some two or three of whom have inherited it from their fathers, who made a fortune by it, ought to be—as are they not?—ranged in a line, in a long matted well (but you might look in vain for truth at the bottom of it) between the registrar's red table and the silk gowns, with bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, references to masters, masters' reports, mountains of costly nonsense, piled before them. Well may the court be dim, with wasting candles here and there; well may the fog hang heavy in it, as if it would never get out; well may the stained-glass windows lose their colour and admit no light of day into the place; well may the uninitiated from the streets, who peep in through the glass panes in the door, be deterred from entrance by its owlish aspect and by the drawl, languidly echoing to the roof from the padded dais where the Lord High Chancellor looks into the lantern that has no light in it and where the attendant wigs are all stuck in a fog-bank! This is the Court of Chancery, which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire, which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse and its dead in every churchyard, which has its ruined suitor with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintance, which gives to monied might the means abundantly of wearying out the right, which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope, so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart, that there is not an honourable man among its practitioners who would not give—who does not often give—the warning, "Suffer any wrong that can be done you rather than come here!"

Who happen to be in the Lord Chancellor's court this murky afternoon besides the Lord Chancellor, the counsel in the cause, two or three counsel who are never in any cause, and the well of solicitors before mentioned? There is the registrar below

4 spaces left in character

To this.



Both these illustrations are the same page of text the e-book version of Dickens' (2009) *Bleak House*. It is almost universally agreed that the later page is easier to read, regardless of whether a person experiences dyslexia or not.

The examples shown above are taken from an Overdrive e-book borrowed from Christchurch City Libraries. All three e-book platforms that Christchurch City Libraries subscribes to (Overdrive, Askews and Wheelers) enable their e-books to be made to have dyslexia friendly text by adjusting the settings of the book once it is downloaded.

## Empirical Evidence

The empirical evidence to support the benefits of these characteristics is equivocal and there is very little of it. The need for more research into this area is greatly needed.

## A way to help children who identify as dyslexic and their carers to find the books in the library

- Introduce the characteristics described above to the child and their carer/parent who is usually with them. It can be useful to provide them with a copy of the British Dyslexia Association's (n.d.) Dyslexia Style Guide to take away.
- Go to the collection and let the child choose a book from the shelves. It can be fiction or non-fiction.
- Look in the book to see if the pages have any of the characteristics described above. If it has at least 2 suggest that the book is taken out and the child tries to read to see if the characteristics it has facilitates the child's reading.
- If the book only has one characteristic suggest that it is a book that the parent/carer reads with the child. Try not to say 'no' to any book as the child has actually shown interest in a book and this is to be encouraged.
- The parent/carer and child are encouraged to take out a variety of books to find out which characteristics helps the child to read. Not all children find all them helpful.
- Encourage child and their parent/carers to visit the library again and see you, if the use of these characteristics has not helped reading so something else can be tried.

## Conclusion

By looking for the four characteristics in a page of text described above and explaining them to the children with dyslexia and their parents/carers all a library's collections can be opened up to them. In addition to this with this knowledge they have been empowered to find the books that work best for their child. They do not have to rely

on the Librarian to do this for them.

## Some final comments from the author's personal experience

I offer this service via a book-a-librarian visit. These visits usually take about an hour, with 30 minutes spent describing the characteristics, and then 30 minutes amongst the collection looking for books.

I developed this service in conjunction with a company of Special Education Assessors here in Christchurch, as this book-a-librarian appointment is the only free service they can offer their customers.

It also appears that these characteristics may also assist people experiencing print disabilities other than dyslexia. Print disabilities are "perceptual or other disabilities which limit their [readers'] ability to follow a line of print or which affects their concentration" National Library of New Zealand (n.d.).

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