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Free resource · 2026 edition

Dyslexia style guide

Practical rules for documents, slides, emails and web pages that everyone can read. Written to follow every rule it contains.

For anyone who makes things other people have to read. No design skills needed. Free to share.

Why this guide exists

Every document you make either includes dyslexic readers or shuts them out.

This is Enna Global's practical style guide for anyone who writes or designs documents here. Making them dyslexia-friendly is rarely about effort. It is a handful of defaults, set once. And accessible layouts are easier for every reader, not just dyslexic ones.

1 in 10

people in the UK are dyslexic. That is around six million readers (British Dyslexia Association).

This guide follows its own rules

- Soft tinted panels, never bright white glare behind long text
- One sans-serif family, body text at 12pt or larger
- 1.5 line spacing, left-aligned, short lines
- Sentence case headings, with no all caps, italics or underlined runs
- Colour always paired with a symbol or a label

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How dyslexia works

A one-minute primer, so the rules that follow make sense.

Dyslexia is a lifelong difference in how the brain processes written language. The hard part is decoding: mapping letters to sounds and holding them together long enough to make a word. For most readers that step is automatic. For dyslexic readers it takes real effort, every time.

That effort comes out of the same working memory used to understand what a sentence means. So anything that makes decoding harder, such as ornate fonts, crowded lines, glare or long sentences, taxes comprehension twice. Good design can't remove the decoding effort, but it can stop adding to it. That is all this guide does.

What it is

A processing difference, usually inherited. It has nothing to do with intelligence or effort (British Dyslexia Association).

What it affects

Matching letters to sounds, reading speed, spelling and working memory. Busy layouts and long sentences cost extra.

What it isn't

Not a vision problem, and not seeing letters "backwards". Many dyslexic people are strong pattern-spotters and big-picture thinkers.

The takeaway: every rule in this guide exists to lower the decoding load. Nothing here is cosmetic.

Dyslexia at work

Reading is most of the job now. That is what makes formatting a business issue.

A professional day is built out of reading. Inbox, decks, policies, dashboards, chat. For a dyslexic colleague, every badly set page adds effort to work they were hired to do well. The people affected are already in your team, and most of them have not told you.

121

emails land in the average office worker's inbox every working day.

Radicati Group, 2025

28%

of the working week goes on reading and answering email alone.

McKinsey Global Institute

23 min

to fully refocus after a single interruption, so re-reading is expensive.

Gloria Mark, UC Irvine

10 to 15%

of people are dyslexic or have a related learning difference, so most teams have several.

British Dyslexia Association

80%

of dyslexic people do not disclose it at work, so you cannot design for the ones you know about.

British Dyslexia Association

What this means in practice

- **Design for the room, not for a request.** If four in five people never disclose, accessible formatting has to be the default.
- **Fix it once, in the template.** One accessible email template or slide master reaches every message after it.
- **It is also the law.** Under the Equality Act 2010 dyslexia can count as a disability, and employers must make reasonable adjustments. Accessible documents are the cheapest adjustment there is.

01 Typefaces

Clean, familiar letter shapes are easier to decode. Ornament works against the reader.

Why it matters: dyslexic readers recognise words partly by their shape. Serifs, flourishes and mixed fonts distort the shapes the eye relies on, so every word costs more to decode.

Aa ✓ Use

Arial	Clean, even shapes
Verdana	Open, generous spacing
Tahoma	So are Calibri & Helvetica

Aa ✕ Avoid

Times New Roman	Serifs blur the shapes
Decorative fonts	Hard to decode
Mixing several fonts	One family, everywhere

In this guide: one sans-serif family, Helvetica Neue, at every size, including the headings.

02 Size, weight and emphasis

If text has to shrink to fit the page, cut words, never the size.

Why it matters: small, thin or heavily styled text weakens letter shapes. The extra decoding effort comes straight out of the working memory needed to understand the sentence.

Below 12pt: too small for body text	✕ Avoid
12pt: the working minimum	✓ Use
12 to 14pt: comfortable for most readers	✓ Use

Bold for emphasis

✓ Stands out without changing letter shapes

Regular, with air

✓ Normal-to-slightly-wide letter spacing helps

Thin weights fade

✕ Too little contrast against the page

ALL CAPS SHOUT

✕ We read by word outline, and caps flatten it

Italics distort

✕ Fine for a word, never a paragraph

Underlines cut tails

✕ Save underlining for links only

03 Lines, spacing and alignment

Visual crowding is one of the biggest barriers. Space is doing the work.

Why it matters: when lines sit tight, letters interfere with their neighbours and it is easy to lose the line you were on, which means re-reading whole passages.

Around one in ten people in the UK are dyslexic. The way a page is laid out decides how hard they have to work to read it, or whether they read it at all.

× **Justified, tight lines.** Uneven gaps form rivers; crowded lines are easy to lose.

Around one in ten people in the UK are dyslexic. The way a page is laid out decides how hard they have to work to read it, or whether they read it at all.

✓ **Left-aligned, 1.5 spacing.** Even gaps and a straight left edge keep the eye on track.

Keep lines to roughly 45 to 70 characters, like this one, then break.

Full-width lines on a wide screen make the sweep back to the next line hard to land. Don't centre body text either. A wandering left edge makes every line a fresh search.

In this guide: body text runs at 1.5 to 1.6 line spacing, left-aligned, in lines of about 60 characters, with space between paragraphs.

04

Colour and contrast

Dark text on a soft background gives high contrast without glare. WCAG 2.2 asks for at least 4.5:1.

Why it matters: low contrast makes letters harder to resolve, while full-glare white causes visual stress for many readers, so text appears to blur, move or "swim".

Dark ink on off-white is easy on the eyes.

✓ 15.9:1 passes

Cream and pastel tints also cut the glare.

✓ 15.2:1 passes

Pale grey on white looks tidy and reads terribly.

× 3.1:1 fails

Text over images and patterns is hard work.

× Unpredictable, avoid

✓ **Pair colour with a symbol or label.** "▲ Deadline: Friday" works for everyone; red alone doesn't.

× **No red with green, no neon.** Hard to tell apart for colour-blind readers; harsh for everyone.

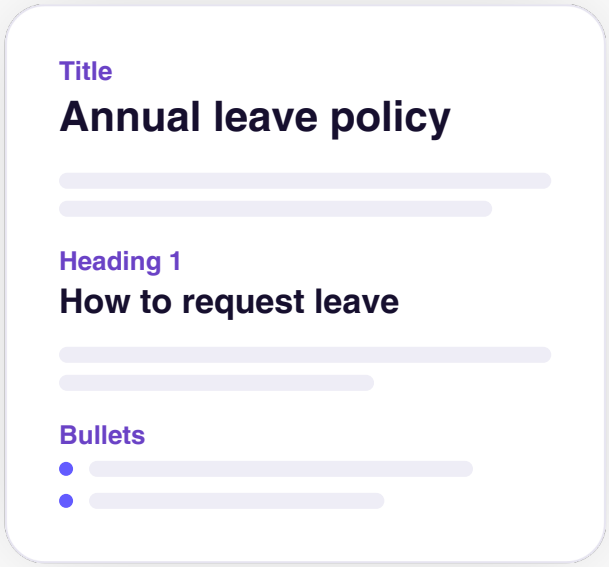
In this guide: long text sits on soft tints rather than glaring white. Check your own pairings free at webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker.

Headings and structure

05

Dyslexic readers scan before they read. Structure is the map that makes scanning possible.

Why it matters: headings let people preview a document and re-find things without re-reading, and they are what text-to-speech tools navigate by.



- ✓ **Use real heading styles** (Heading 1, Heading 2). Screen readers and navigation panes depend on them.
- ✓ **Make headings say something.** "How to request leave" beats "Introduction".
- ✓ **One idea per paragraph,** bullets for lists, and the key point first, not buried at the end.
- ✗ **No walls of text.** If a page has no headings, it has no way in.
- ✗ **Don't skip levels.** Heading 1 to Heading 3 breaks the map for people listening to the document.

06

Writing style

Plain language is not dumbing down. It is respect for the reader's time.

Why it matters: decoding already uses working memory. Long sentences, jargon and idioms stack a second load on top, so meaning gets dropped.

"The requisite documentation should be submitted by employees prior to the commencement of the leave period."

× Passive voice, formal padding, no clear actor.

"Send us your form before your leave starts."

✓ Active voice, eight words, same meaning.

utilise → **use**

commence → **start**

approximately → **about**

in the event that → **if**

prior to → **before**

- ✓ **Short sentences.** 15 to 20 words, one idea each. Spell out an acronym the first time you use it.
- ✓ **Repeat what matters.** A deadline belongs in the subject line and the body, not just the last paragraph.
- × **Skip idioms and metaphors.** "Touch base to move the needle" is extra decoding work for no extra meaning.

07

Images, icons and diagrams

A clear diagram can replace a paragraph. A decorative one just adds noise.

Why it matters: a good visual carries meaning without any decoding at all. It is the one channel dyslexia leaves untouched.

Do

- **Use visuals to support text.** Flowcharts, timelines and icons carry meaning fast.
- **Label parts directly on the diagram,** not in a legend the eye must shuttle to and from.
- **Keep icons simple and consistent.** One style, one weight, always with a text label.
- **Leave space around images** so text doesn't wrap tightly against them.

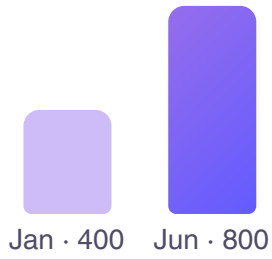
Don't

- **Don't place text over photos or patterns.** Contrast becomes unpredictable everywhere.
- **Don't share pictures of text.** Screenshots of paragraphs can't be resized, reflowed or read aloud.
- **Don't decorate.** An image that adds no meaning still costs attention.
- **Don't crowd diagrams.** If it needs a magnifying glass, it needs a redraw.

08 Alt text and screen readers

Many dyslexic people listen to documents with text-to-speech. Your structure is what they hear.

Why it matters: for someone listening, alt text, headings and link names are the document. If they are missing, the content simply is not there.



Alt text for the same chart

- ✗ "Image of a chart." The listener learns nothing.
- ✓ "Bar chart: sign-ups doubled between January and June, from 400 to 800." That is the point of the chart, in one sentence.

- ✓ **Say what matters, not what it is.** Skip "image of". The screen reader already announces that.
- ✓ **Write meaningful link text.** "Download the leave form", never "click here" or a bare URL.
- ✓ **Keep text as text.** Real headings, real paragraphs and tagged PDFs read aloud; flattened images don't.
- ✓ **Run the built-in checker before you send.** In Word, PowerPoint and Outlook: Review → Check Accessibility.

09

Video, captions and motion

Reading to a timer is the hardest reading there is. Give people control of the pace.

Why it matters: dyslexic readers often need a second pass. Text that moves or disappears takes that second pass away.



Do

- **Caption every video** with accurate captions, not auto-generated ones left unchecked.
- **Offer a transcript** so people can read, or listen, at their own speed.
- **Let people pause, replay and change speed.** Controls are an accessibility feature.
- **Keep on-screen text still** and on screen long enough to read twice.

Don't

- **Don't autoplay.** Sound and motion the reader didn't ask for break concentration.
- **No flashing.** WCAG 2.2 allows nothing that flashes more than three times a second.
- **No text that scrolls, ticks or disappears** on its own timer.
- **No busy motion behind text.** Looping background video makes words swim.

10 On screen and on paper

The same rules apply in both places, plus a few that only matter in one.

Why it matters: on screen, readers can zoom, reflow and listen, but only if text is real. On paper those escape hatches are gone, so the page itself has to do the work.

On screen

- **Keep text real and selectable** so readers can resize it, restyle it, or have it read aloud.
- **Export tagged PDFs.** In Word: File → Save As → PDF keeps headings and reading order.
- **Let layouts reflow** when text is zoomed to 200%, with no fixed text boxes that clip.
- **Respect dark-mode and reader settings.** They exist because defaults fail someone.

On paper

- **Matte paper, never glossy.** Gloss reflects light straight into the reader's eyes.
- **Off-white or cream stock** instead of brilliant white.
- **Go a size up.** Print reads smaller than screens, so 12pt on screen often needs 14pt on paper.
- **Check the photocopy.** Pale colours and thin weights vanish by the third generation.

The one-page checklist

Keep this page beside you. Tick all twelve and your document is dyslexia-friendly.

- [ ] One sans-serif typeface throughout
- [ ] Body text 12pt or larger
- [ ] Line spacing at least 1.5
- [ ] Lines of roughly 45 to 70 characters
- [ ] Left-aligned, never justified
- [ ] Dark text on a soft background, contrast 4.5:1 or better
- [ ] No all caps, italic runs or underlines (links aside)
- [ ] Colour never carries meaning alone
- [ ] Real heading styles, in order, that say something
- [ ] Short sentences, plain words, acronyms explained
- [ ] Alt text on every meaningful image; no text over images
- [ ] Captions on video; nothing flashes or autoplays

Free tools that help

Accessibility Checker

Review → Check Accessibility in Word, PowerPoint and Outlook.

WebAIM Contrast Checker

Free colour-contrast checks at webaim.org.

Hemingway Editor

Highlights long sentences and complex words at hemingwayapp.com.

Do it within your tools

Word/Powerpoint

Home → Styles for headings; Review → Check Accessibility before sending

Google Docs

Format → Paragraph styles for headings; Tools → Accessibility

Export

Save it as PDF *Not “Print to PDF”) to keep headings and reading order

Make your next document easier to read.

Enna helps organisations build workplaces where neurodivergent people thrive, through free neurodiversity tests, workplace needs assessments, training and consulting.

Share this guide with the person who creates your templates, materials and communications. Find more free resources at **enna.org**.

Sources and further reading

- British Dyslexia Association, Dyslexia Friendly Style Guide (2023)
- W3C, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 (2023)
- WebAIM, Contrast Checker, webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker

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