

Sabira Stahlberg

Easy-to-read inspiration



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Introduction

The need for Easy-to-read books is growing parallel to profound changes in our reading and writing habits. Social media, chats, videos and games, and an overall increasing internet use, are usually given as reasons for why it is no longer so important, modern or “cool” to read a book. Attitudes in society towards reading have changed as well: to immerse oneself in a book is not the fashion any longer; reading should be quick, simple, and preferably occur without much effort. To read a book does not take a few seconds or minutes, however: it requires concentration and perseverance.

Reading difficulties are detected at a much earlier stage today than ever previously, and people who for various reasons experience difficulties while reading receive more understanding and support. At the same time, an expanding group of children find reading a challenge. Their mechanic reading, decoding of texts, reading skills, reading understanding and vocabulary are insufficient for acquiring knowledge from school books, and they soon lose interest in reading.

To be able to read is a fundamental prerequisite to function and feel safe in modern society. That is why

this development is dangerous in perspective. People with weak reading skills encounter difficulties when handling important information and managing their own affairs, and they can be manipulated, oppressed and exploited by others.

Easy-to-read is an important instrument to convey written information and knowledge in an easily accessible way to all in society.

Easy-to-read texts and books play a crucial role: when more people in society receive the possibility to read, more people get the chance to participate and make a difference. With Easy-to-read texts, most citizens in the society get access to information and knowledge. Easy-to-read information might even save lives during crises, and it certainly increases safety and supports democracy in society. This means that everyone in society benefits from Easy Language and Easy-to-read texts and books – either directly as readers and users, or indirectly, because others have a chance to read. In recent years, several states have become aware about the usefulness of Easy Language and Easy-to-read, and some states have introduced laws guaranteeing access to information in Easy Language for all.

Easy-to-read adventures

When I started working with Easy-to-read more than twenty years ago, the concept was quite well-known in Sweden, but in Finland many were sceptical; also other writers did not perceive Easy-to-read books as “authentic” literature. Only many years later, mass media began offering news in Easy Language. Today, Easy-to-read is more accepted, but Easy book authors are still considered to have lower status, and they get both less attention and support. That is probably why there are relatively few of us still. Easy-to-read is also a form of literature requiring special knowledge.

With my first Easy book, *Miranda* (2001), I wanted to raise an issue I thought then, and still believe, is important to discuss – bullying. My childhood friend Maria Viitasalo, who witnessed and also partly shared my experiences of being bullied, had trained to be a teacher. During our first discussion about Easy books our hero Philip was born, complete with his mobile phone which never functions when he needs it.

Maria’s knowledge and experience from the world of education provided the pedagogical foundations to almost thirty Easy books. She also developed a unique style as illustrator of Easy pictures.

The creation of Easy-to-read books means for me a challenge to develop language skills and awareness, deepen general knowledge, and to investigate current issues more deeply – in other words: an adventure. In addition to Swedish and English, I have developed my language knowledge also during processes of creating new Easy Languages for Bulgarian, Serbian and Tatar. I have immersed myself in widely different subjects: physics, chemistry, geography, biology, technology, and brain research; I have written novels, adventures, crime, mysteries, travel narratives, and about climate, history, food and much more. I have been on writer tours as an Easy author, lectured in several countries, and launched innovative projects to develop Easy-to-read literature internationally.

After author, editor and translator, I soon became a versatile all-rounder: publisher, educator, blogger, publicist, designer, web master and video producer. I have sold Easy books at festivals and book fairs in several countries, arranged events and built networks in multiple languages. Since 2015, I lead Team Bokpil with over sixty participants in different parts of the world. As a scholar, I also research Easy-to-read and follow closely its development both on national and international levels.

Easy-to-read inspiration

These manifold experiences and adventures are still awaiting description, but many insights are included in this book. The book fills a need both pedagogues and parents have indicated during our conversations: a book which describes Easy-to-read, explains how it functions, and how it can be used to support reading and learning. Thus, I here offer not only facts, ideas, tips, suggestions, experiences, examples for activities, but also texts, illustrations and tools for all who need, work with, and want to know more, and also for those who are researching Easy literature.

My heartfelt thanks goes to partners, collaborators and teachers, all who have supported us, believed in our work, and provided feedback over the years. The original Swedish language book was kindly funded by the Tre Smeder foundation, Finland. A big thank you to our Team Bokpil for many important insights, and especially to Maria Viitasalo and Easy writer, editor and translator Marianne Stahlberg, who have walked through the labyrinths of Easy literature and charted the path with me for the past twenty years, and who also have taken part in the creation of this book.

Sabira Stahlberg

What is Easy-to-read?

Easy-to-read are texts and literature written in Easy Language.

Easy Language is a clearer, simpler and more easily understandable form of Standard Language – that is the language form which is used in society and taught in schools. Easy Language is both spoken and written. Easy Language in written form is called Easy-to-read.

Standard language = the language form which is commonly used in society

Easy-to-read texts and books are nowadays available in many formats: there are among others printed or “traditional” paper books, electronic (e-)books, audio books, websites and comics. Many publishers offer extra materials, tasks and questions about the texts free of charge on the web. Easy literature is accessible on the internet, in book stores and libraries; there is a broad range of both entertaining and serious works. The supply and diversity are increasing. But just like

with literature in Standard Language, the quality of the books can be extremely varied.

In each country, the definition of Easy Language is different, depending on prevailing attitudes, prestige, and how well-known or accepted it is. The discussion about exact definitions is still going on, and probably will continue also in the future, while Easy Language is evolving and the research contributes new insights. The question of how Easy Language is to be defined can be quite complicated, because it is not only about politics and rights, but also about what the society thinks is the language norm, and emotions as well; language is something we humans generally feel very strongly about and take sides for or against.

Originally, Easy-to-read was developed to support disabled persons, but nowadays Easy texts are used in schools, and Easy books and texts are being read by many kinds of readers, also strong ones. Easy-to-read has developed enormously since the first books were published more than fifty years ago. The literature has become a lot more varied and nuanced, but still all Easy-to-read books and texts keep one important common characteristic – the language is more easy to read and understand than Standard Language.

Easy Language – a natural language?

A question still being debated in different disciplines is whether the Easy Language is natural or artificial. Those unfamiliar with how constructed languages function prefer to classify it as artificial, because it employs a simpler grammar and a limited vocabulary in comparison with Standard Language. This example shows differences, but also similarities:

Standard language	Easy Language
A comparison between Standard Language and Easy Language shows clearly how the same contents can be expressed with different methods.	When we compare society's language with Easy Language we see how the same thing can be said in different ways.

According to the criteria of linguistics, Easy Language is a natural language. Just like Standard Language, it is anchored in specific language and cultural spheres and in a society; the same language rules apply. Easy Language differs chiefly in its expressions and word choices.

Easy Language can be defined as
a variation of Standard Language.

Easy Language has not been constructed consciously like the various languages in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, or film language Klingon in the *Star Trek* TV series. In constructed languages usually grammar and word formation are regular, clear and logical; in natural languages there are numerous exceptions and deviations. Those who speak the language every day perceive these as normal, but they often complicate life for language learners.

Irregular traits are common in
natural languages.
Why do we say for example
little – smaller – smallest, and not
little – more little – most little
or *little – littler – littlest*?

Natural languages exist in a historical context. They have also developed, and loaned words, expressions, structures and concepts from and to other languages and cultures. These processes can be tracked far back in time. Constructed and artificial languages have a

much shorter history – they were popular in Europe in the 1800s – and many of the constructed languages exist only on paper. Artificial languages are today developed for computer simulations, in contrast to constructed languages created for other purposes. Scholars however point out that those constructed languages, which gain popularity and are spoken by more people transform into natural languages, for example through loanwords, and they also feature far more irregular characteristics than those on paper.

What characterises Easy-to-read?

To be categorised as Easy-to-read, a text must follow certain criteria. In every language, the norm for Easy Language differs, since the structures and vocabulary vary greatly between languages. The technical aspect of the reading process, decoding, that is when letters or characters are combined into words, also vary. To read in English and Japanese are different processes for the eyes and the brain. Learning a new language means to learn also a new way to decode a text. The reading habits, experience, skills and understanding of an individual influence how this reader assimilates

the text, but decoding techniques are mostly trained at school. Traditions and norms transmitted at school often define what people think is an easily readable text for a specific language – but it is not necessarily an Easy-to-read text.

Decoding = combining
letters/characters into words
Reading habit = reading routine
Reading skill = ability
to grasp text
Reading comprehension =
understand text

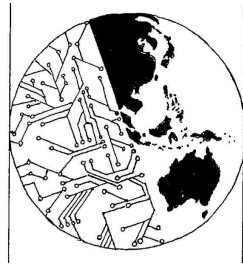


Illustration from *Philip and the net* (2016)

Criteria for Easy Language in English, Swedish and many other languages are relatively few and flexible, but for example for German or Finnish detailed rules have been formulated. In the Finnish guidelines there are around a hundred criteria for measuring an Easy text. Complex measurement tools could provide more precise results than for instance the readability index LIX, which chiefly counts long words and sentences. Too many and too strict criteria, however, can cause the language to become unnatural and stiff.

Some criteria are:

1. Language

The most important element assigning a text as Easy-to-read is the language. The contents may be difficult or easy to understand and process, but if the contents are expressed in Easy Language, then the text is an Easy-to-read.

Easy books do not have to be trivial, just because the language is easy. They can contain rich language and simultaneously lots of layers in the contents, and in a natural way offer the reader words, concepts and contexts in accessible, creative and varied language.

A few basic international principles, which can be adapted easily to different languages, are for example:

- clear, understandable
and everyday language
- easier and shorter words
- explain difficult words
- avoid compound words
- simple inflection forms
- explicit sentence structure
- fewer subordinate clauses
- short sentences, lines and paragraphs

2. Contents

Easy-to-read books offer the same reading experience as books in the Standard Language, but in Easy texts there are no unnecessary elements: a reading process should happen smoothly. The readability of the text is naturally influenced also by the way the contents are structured and presented.

Reading process = decoding
and interpreting text
Readability = how easy or difficult
a text is to read (degree)

What is essential? Finding the balance can be tricky. Readers react differently, some are distracted by too much information, while others get bored if there is too little to “chew on” in the text. A rule of thumb is that a reader should be able to walk securely through the book, and not get lost in the story. Experience is a good assistant: an author who often writes Easy texts learns to produce directly in Easy Language, and to put clear “road signs” to follow in the right locations for the reader. To clarity of the contents contribute among others these factors:

- short and transparent chapters
- concise dialogues and scenes
- fewer descriptions: focus on events
- clearly structured information
- logical chains of events

3. Outlook and design

The outlook and design of a text affect the readability. In an Easy book, the layout contains few pictures and no extra elements. The larger font size and choice of font support mechanical reading; the text is easier to grasp for the eyes and the brain. Easy books can, both because of the Easy Language and the clear layout, be read with much less effort than books in the Standard Language.

Mechanical reading = eyes and brain
absorb and process
the visible elements of a text

Clarity in the layout makes it possible for the reader to concentrate on reading, interpreting, processing, and assimilating the text.

Elements influencing the outlook of a book page and makes it Easy-to-read are among others:

- **larger letters, sans serif**
- bigger line spaces
- extra line space between paragraphs
- no columns, frames or extra elements
- lots of white space around text, large margins
- clear contrast between text and page surface

4. Illustrations

The illustrations in an Easy book should support the reading, not disturb it. If you compare Easy-to-read books with richly illustrated, colourful children's and youth books, Easy books may look less attractive. It is, however, a matter of how text and pictures are being processed while reading: the eyes of persons, who are mainly used to decode visual elements, directly go to pictures, while the text gets little or no attention. On the other hand, unfamiliar readers and persons with reading challenges often need to decode and process text and illustrations separately.

Illustrations are present in Easy-to-read books in order to make the reading more pleasant. But reading

is the focus; the pictures only offer added value to the text, and an extra dimension to the story. Illustrations must not tell the book's story, but they can show such elements which are not explicit, raise questions and trigger the thought and analytic processes of a reader.

In Easy-to-reads, clearly demarcated illustrations should appear maximum one per page, preferably on a separate page in order not to disturb the reading. In Easy book design, the number of pictures and their readability are being planned from the start.

Some principles are:

- fewer pictures in the book
- clear goals for each picture
- explicit illustrations
- preferably in black and white
- easily decodable elements
- effortless recognition for the reader

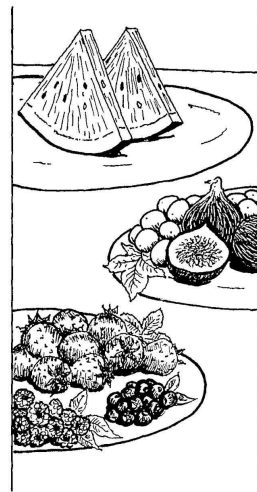


Illustration from *Philip and the snow* (2016)

An Easy-to-read illustration requires neither artistic analysis, nor complicated decoding.

Easy illustrations, like Easy texts, contain elements readers easily recognise. Environments and people of course vary in our great wide world, but it is quite possible to create illustrations with neutral value and cultures, which can be perceived and understood also outside the original culture they were created in.

Specifically, when books are planned from the start to be translated, it is necessary to think about what messages the pictures carry. One method could be to avoid for example texts in the illustrations, or maybe make the text fields easily replaceable with words in another language in the picture.

Where the illustrations are placed in an Easy book is important, as the location can increase or decrease the readers' understanding during reading. A picture should be added only after its topic has been told or mentioned in the story. Otherwise the reader might have difficulties grasping the meaning and context of the illustration. A chain of events could be combined into a series, a box or a circle to challenge the reader – Easy pictures do not need to be oversimplified.

Easy-to-read pictures should also have these goals:

- anchor the reading experience in the real world
- broaden understanding of the text
- offer materials for further processing
- provide a possibility for readers to identify with persons, places and events
- encourage further reading and analysis
- support development of decoding skills

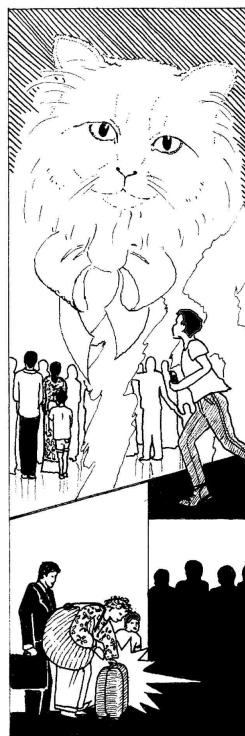
In *Philip at the airport* (2016) several events are combined into one illustration.

A boy grabs Philip's mobile phone by mistake at the security check in the airport.

Philip gets instead a phone with a cat picture.

Philip chases the boy, but there are enormous queues everywhere.

He stumbles on other people's bags while running.



Easy-to-read genres

Easy-to-read books are usually placed on a separate shelf in libraries. Many readers therefore believe that Easy literature is a genre. But Easy-to-read books can be divided into various genres: novels, poetry, facts, crime, and several more. Should Easy books then be considered both as a separate genre – books written in Easy Language – and as specific literary form with various genres? The Easy books today are numerous and diverse. A more exact categorisation would help readers to find the works that interest them in book stores and libraries.

Many Easy-to-read books
can be read by all age groups.

Easy literature is now utilised a lot in schools, and the majority of the readers are children and youth. But also adults, senior citizens and those learning a new language increasingly read Easy books; yet the books are often marked with age recommendations. Some books are written for a specific age group, but many Easy books can be read by all independently of age. The quantity of books targeting adult audiences is

growing, but adult readers have a hard time finding Easy books in libraries, as these are very often placed among children's books. More discussion and clearer definitions are required, so that Easy-to-read books can find their right place on the bookshelf.

Original = written directly in Easy Language
Modified = reworked into Easy Language

Easy-to-read books are either original, when the text is written directly in Easy Language, or modified. The modified books are usually shortened, simplified and rewritten versions into Easy Language of originally Standard Language works by famous authors. Those who cannot manage reading the remarkable book all other people are talking about get the chance to enjoy the book in a modified Easy-to-read format.

Modifying works into Easy Language raises very much the question about what is really important and essential in a text. It is important to note that both the original and the modified Easy books fulfil important functions. The only concrete difference is the way in which they are produced.

Why Easy-to-read?

Easy-to-read = text in Easy Language
Easy Language = simpler language

A global history about Easy-to-read has not yet been written, but since several decades learners of English have become familiar with *Easy Read(er)s*, modified and shortened classics. In the beginning, *Easy Read* was used also for what is now called *Easy-to-read*, but today they are considered two different formats.

The origins of Easy-to-read go back to the 1960s in northwestern Europe. The aim was to create texts in an easily understandable language for persons with disabilities. Today many more groups of readers have discovered Easy books: Easy Language is being used by various groups and speakers, and support not only persons with reading difficulties, but also unfamiliar and unmotivated readers with weak reading skills. A growing number of people read now only short news, chats, social media, and other quickly graspable texts on the web. That does not develop reading skills, and many people find reading longer texts a challenge.

Easy-to-read books support also language learners, because of their everyday language, easy words, and expressions that can be utilised immediately. Elderly with memory disorders can continue to enjoy reading books through Easy literature. People who can benefit from Easy books are among others those with:

- disabilities
- special needs
- reading difficulties
- learning difficulties
- unfamiliar and/or lack of motivation to read
- language difficulties
- limited vocabulary and language knowledge
- impaired vision
- memory disorders
- a need to learn/develop a new language

Who else would need Easy-to-read? It is not easy to determine. Some need Easy books during a period of their lives in order to create reading habits, and then they move on to Standard Language literature. Others might need Easy-to-read for a longer time. For some readers, Easy texts and books could be the only way to get information or enjoy literature. For those who

are learning a new language, Easy-to-read books are frequently a step on the way among dozens of other tools. The need for Easy literature varies greatly both among individuals and various reader groups.

All people could need Easy-to-read at some point in their lives.

Identifying the “typical” reader of Easy literature gets even more complicated when we consider that Easy books exist in many languages, but research is mostly carried out in a few countries in Europe and limited to certain languages; the other languages and readers seldom receive attention. A broader mapping out of readers could provide a clearer picture of who are actually reading and who would need Easy-to-read.

How many people need Easy literature? There are various ways of measuring, from international PIRLS, PISA and PIAAC studies (for fourth graders, fifteen-year-olds and adults respectively), all which provide information about reading skills, to surveys involving publishers concerning sales, and general calculations that 10–15% of the population Europe is dyslectic. These figures can only give rough estimates about the needs, however.

Easy-to-read today serves many kinds of readers, also those who traditionally are not expected to need Easy texts.

The question about need could be reformulated: how many in society benefit from Easy texts? What are the advantages they get? How do they use Easy texts, and what do they read? How many employ Easy books to learn languages or to acquire knowledge? How many more could get the chance to gather information and knowledge, and to enjoy literature through Easy-to-read?

Among the many thousands of readers I have met in different places in the world during the past twenty years, there are many readers who cannot be defined as belonging to this or that group. Easy books are in a process of development; they change, become richer and more diversified, and nowadays attract readers who are not supposed to need Easy literature. Many are strong readers, who are capable of reading novels and science. They read Easy books because of interest in the topic or to study languages. They check Easy Language websites, too, to get information quickly in a compact and easily accessible format.

In contrast, there are persons who would benefit from Easy texts, but for some reason they do not find Easy Language materials. A reason might be that they do not know about Easy-to-read, but many also have fears and prejudices or feel shame, because reading does not function “as it should”. Some are scared that they will get stuck in a “swamp” and never be able to read anything else than Easy texts. Others believe that Easy literature is only for children, or for people with dyslexia. Certain people reject Easy-to-read without any specific reason. When we ask them why, often they confess that they actually do not know anything about Easy-to-read, or that their idea about it has not been updated to the present situation.

Easy-to-read is being developed and updated all the time.

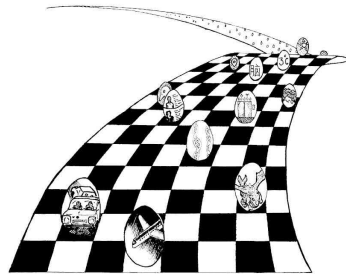


Illustration from *Catch the eye* (2019)

Accessibility

Easy Language and Easy-to-read
increase the accessibility to language.

Easy-to-read literature has been created to offer all a chance to read. Easy-to-read is a form of text which makes the written word accessible to most people in society. Why is it so important to generate language accessibility?

Everyone is expected to learn how to read at school – this is the social norm. With weak reading skills or without reading ability, it will be difficult to take care of everyday matters and to deal with banks, doctors or authorities, among many other things. People who are incapable of understanding written information become marginalised, dependent on others, and the capacity to make their own independent decisions or take action is limited.

Language accessibility contributes to inclusion. In a group where everyone reads the same Easy book, all are included in the discussions and joint activities. An accessibility to language also means that all have the right to communication in an Easy Language they can understand. In a society, where the majority of people

can receive information in Easy Language, they also get the chance to participate and influence society. In a global perspective it is probably a question of the egg and the chicken: Easy-to-read is generally present in countries where democracy and inclusion are seen as important, and this in turn contributes to support democracy and inclusion.

Access to reading experiences

Researchers assert that regular readers develop and enrich their experiences and knowledge. Reading has an impact on emotions and reduces fears and stress. The reader gains both knowledge and a possibility to process feelings, thoughts and memories; to reflect and attain insights. The response from our readers shows that their reading experiences and reactions are the same for Easy books as for Standard Language books: thus, format is less significant than contents.

The topic of climate change is present practically every day in mass media. Many people are afraid of things happening already now, but they cannot, or do not, have the patience to read popular science articles filled with scientific jargon.

When our climate book *Hugo's history* came out in 2017, it was immediately widely acknowledged. The book continues to be relevant. Hugo talks in the book about his family and neighbours, world history, and climate. Knowledge and facts are interspersed with adventures and travels.

How many different facts about a volcanic eruption are included in this sample from *Hugo's history*?

Soon also the earth was shaking.
'Only an earthquake', said the relatives.
'No danger.
Hope it is not the volcano...'

But it was the volcano erupting.
Hot lava spurted from its top
and flowed down the slopes
of the mountain.
Thick grey and black smoke filled the air.
The smoke formed a cloud and
the sun disappeared in a haze.

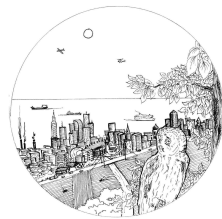
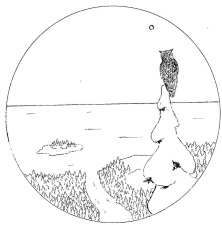
Many readers have told us that they finally grasp what climate change is about from Hugo. During a project in 2021, children in USA and Bulgaria read the book together with an artist. They worked with the topic

through discussions and drawings. The artist created artworks, which were published on the internet with the original drawings by the children. Their teachers reported that anxiety levels dropped, and fears for the future transformed into a broader understanding of the environment, and their own impact on climate.

In *Hugo's history* (2017), climate issues are anchored in historical events, providing knowledge about climate and what affects it.

Easy illustrations contribute to the reading experience. Readers can create their own views about the historical periods.

From the left:
Ice Age, Viking period, Modern times.



Illustrations from *Hugo's history* (2017)

Senior reading experiences

In publishing, both in Standard Language and Easy-to-read, senior citizens are often forgotten. Many of them have been active readers all their lives, and wish to continue enjoying literature also when memory or eyesight are failing. A novel with small font, complex plots, requiring readers to keep lots of details in their heads, might be too complicated. Today, many older people have already read Easy books with their own children or grandchildren, and taking the step to get an adult Easy book is shorter for them than for those, who have never encountered an Easy book. But we need much more, and more varied Easy literature for people with long life experience.

Reading experiences are important for all, regardless of age.

Illustration from *Philip and the fog* (2016)



Another solution could be audio books, but readers often want to hold an “old-fashioned” paper book in their hands. Easy books require much less patience, persistence and memory capacity. In Easy books, the

font is bigger, and lines and chapters are shorter. It is easy to follow and remember the plot, because there are few characters and digressions. The Easy book is usually thinner than works in Standard Language.

Team Bokpil's experiences from readings of books in both Easy and Standard Language at senior homes (including silent reading – many also want to read by themselves), show that Easy books are not perceived differently from “ordinary” works by elderly listeners. They receive new impulses and memories arise. The books trigger lively discussions, especially when also the reader is of a similar age, and capable of relating to the memories and views of the listeners.

Economic accessibility

Economic accessibility is important so that everyone gets the chance to read. Libraries play an important role, because they offer literature to all without extra payment. But Easy books are expensive to produce, as they are commonly printed in smaller quantities and with hard covers, and the price is set at a higher level than for books in Standard Language. Some readers, however, feel that hard cover books are too serious

and ambitious. We have therefore chosen to print soft covers to lower the threshold for reading.

Websites are mostly free of charge. Publishers and organisations publish materials and sometimes also books on the internet. Should Easy-to-read books be completely free? It would be a great help to families and schools struggling with too limited resources for literature. The objection to this is that also publishers must survive. Most of the publishers are small, and the support they receive to produce a book is seldom sufficient. Easy books sell slowly, mostly over several years. The market for them is different – Easy books cannot compete with Standard Language literature. Without funding, publishers are often unable to cope with this situation.

Further, Easy-to-read publishing requires qualified experts: writers, editors, publishers, test readers, and illustrators and designers. They have either studied or learned their trade by working with Easy books, and each one of them possesses unique knowledge and competences. New funding forms are needed, so that these professionals will want to, and be able to work on a long-term basis with Easy literature. Funding is also required to make this form of literature more economically accessible for all.

Successful reading

Reading improves health.

Research shows that those who read books regularly are healthier than habitual surfers on the internet. Reading is a long-term, calming activity, which affects thinking and development of intellect and emotions. Reading also enhances mental processing of various situations, experiences and relationships, broadens attitudes, and improves language skills.

Imagination is activated while reading.
This intensifies the experience of the text
and strengthens the memory.

While reading, the reader recreates characters, places and events in the imagination. An author might tell in great detail or describe, but the reader is the one who creates a world out of the book. Readers often find solutions in books, discover new behaviour models or get inspiration. Films (movies) and other audiovisual products like games do not offer the same imaginative

experience, because the visual dimension is already completed and finished.

A book offers the possibility to escape, reflect and analyse. A book is a safe space, where the reader can relax, disconnect with the world outside and dive into something utterly different from daily life. Reading can also be used for treatment: bibliotherapy among other methods can support the work with traumatic experiences and situations.

Book therapy or bibliotherapy combines reading, work with one's own stories, and discussions.

Reading can also help understand how we change. If we read the same book repeatedly during various life periods, we are looking at ourselves in a mirror: what kind of reactions does the book provoke now? What has changed since the last time we read it?

This method of reading a book again after some time works both for all age groups, children, youth, adults and seniors, and gives the reader an option for deeper self-reflection.

Reading accomplishment

It is important to create solid reading habits already in childhood, but it is also essential to succeed in the reading process. The feeling of achievement causes our brains to release more of the neurotransmitter dopamine. Dopamine influences the central nervous system, and is linked with joy, attention, motivation, alertness, and other “good” feelings. Self-confidence increases. A positive reading experience can change attitudes towards reading: the difficult and tiresome activity can become interesting and even thrilling.

Reading has to be practised continually.

Reading has to be exercised and the skills developed by reading different kinds of books. The books should offer the reader a chance to learn something new, to engage and think. At best, books become friends the reader can always return to and keep up a dialogue with. Enjoyable reading experiences and a successful reading process motivate the reader to go on with the reading. Yet, for successful reading, an Easy-to-read book could be an appropriate tool.

A less overwhelming Easy book could work when a Standard Language book is too difficult. The contents of the Easy book must be appealing, so that reading feels meaningful, just like with Standard Language books. The story should not be too simple or lacking; if it is, the reader feels insecure or dissatisfied, and stops reading.

Easy-to-read books should challenge their readers. Our hero Philip grows a little with every book, and his world, family, school, and friends become more and more complex. The reader can grow with him (both boys and girls do exactly that, according to feedback from parents) and get involved in his life and actions. But at the same time the story and the details must not be too complicated to assimilate.

Easy-to-read books need “pauses” in the text, so that the reader can stop and reflect about the events in the story.

An Easy book plot is a mix of events, contemplations and dialogue, giving readers time to think and react. A too dense story loses the reader on the way. Several authors like cliffhangers: a chapter is stopped in the middle of a dangerous scene or ends with a surprise.

Yet, constant excitement becomes tedious in the long run. Discovering the next corpse as soon as the story pace begins to slacken does not activate imagination in the reader.

In our books there are neither murders, sex, brutal violence or similar elements, because we want to tell stories about situations anyone can encounter – and to awaken curiosity. In a book about topics that are useful for the reader, not only facts but also questions relating to life, there is added value for the reader. Preferably the Easy book should challenge the reader in a balanced way both with the text and illustrations, and encourage readers to find out more about various topics.

How are readers challenged by this cover picture of *Fly in the wind* (2018)?



Reading gamification

In gamified Easy-to-read books, the language and the contents gradually turn more difficult. Every chapter corresponds to a specific language level. After each chapter there are questions or games. They give both readers and teachers the possibility to observe what language level the reader is able to manage and which aspects of the reading process require more work.

Gamification is a term used in the computer world, but it has become popular also in pedagogy. Specially to unfamiliar, weak or unmotivated readers, gamified books can be a way to “slip” into the path of reading.

Gamification increases interaction
and engagement with the text.

In addition to developing pedagogical games for our books, we have gamified several of our earlier books. Two books, *Philip and the spider* and *The palm and the spy* (2022) were written directly in the new format we invented in 2021, and the topic of both is critical reading of sources. Pictures with numbers referring to the Key section at the end were added to relevant places of the text. The picture below indicates “ask an

expert”, number 8 in the Key chapter. We put it where the information or the news most efficiently could be checked with the help of an expert (teacher, librarian, researcher...). The readers can analyse, question and engage directly while reading the book.

Illustration from
The palm and the spy (2022)



Extra materials, questions and tasks

Questions and tasks are created to enrich the reading of Easy-to-read books. When readers work with a text in different ways, information and contents remain more efficiently in their memory. Activities besides book talks could for instance be answering questions, working with tasks, explaining meanings of words or drawing pictures, writing texts about illustrations, or writing stories about different topics or questions in a book. Many tasks also aim at improving the reading understanding. In *Philip at the zoo* (2016), reading comprehension is checked in this way in chapter 10:

In the monkey house

1. lives a nice and boring monkey
2. Philip takes a photo of the monkey
3. the monkey takes a photo of Philip

Extra materials freely available on the internet can usually be adapted to the needs of a learner group or individuals, and reworked into questions or games on different educational web platforms. The materials are mainly created for teachers, but can also be used for individual work.

CAPITAL LETTER BOOKS

In capital letter books, the text is printed in CAPITAL LETTERS for readers with special needs, or those who have difficulties differentiating upper/lower cases. A text printed in capital letters makes the brain register the font size as larger. The risk of mixing mirrored letters such as **b** and **d** is reduced when the forms are **B** and **D**. Also reading speed increases when the brain perceives reading as effortless and enjoyable; chances for successful reading multiply.

UPPER CASE TEXTS HELP READERS
TO MORE EASILY PROCESS THE LETTERS
AND NOT TO CONFUSE THEM.

There are still very few capital letter books available, although the books are technically unproblematic to produce and there is a growing need for them. Easy books especially should be more often converted into capital letter books. They support the reading process additionally, with short sentences, lines and chapters, larger font size and lots of white space on the page.

Tactile alphabet and talking books

Easy-to-read for the visually impaired, in the forms of talking books and tactile alphabet (Braille) books, and extra materials have been produced for our books in Swedish in Finland. To learn how to read the tactile alphabet is a learning process like many others, and requires effort. Easy-to-read Braille books support the reading process in the same way as the other formats of Easy-to-reads. Easy literature could be integrated in tactile alphabet teaching, and talking books should be used more often to deepen the reading experience.

Audio books

Audio books have captured a substantial segment of the global book market in recent years. In Sweden, listening to audio books (not to be confused with the previously mentioned talking books for the visually impaired) has been defined as “reading with the ears”. Teachers and experts recommend audio books as a gateway to books especially for teenagers, who refuse to read. But only listening does not develop the brain as much as reading, despite the fact that listening can develop knowledge and language skills, too.

There is a great difference between a parent who reads aloud and discusses a book with the child, and listening to an audio book. In the situation where the person reading aloud is present, both the reader and the listener exchange and engage. Audio books do not have the same effect, although today writers, readers and producers try to make the books more interactive through intonation changes, music and sound effects.

Easy-to-read books are excellent books for reading aloud. Many of our readers, parents and grandparents read aloud to their children or grandchildren. Some of our test readers for books are children who cannot read themselves yet. Their reactions while listening

tell us how exciting and how understandable the new manuscript is.

Listening and parallel reading of a book support the development of reading skills and reading understanding.

Videos of Easy-to-read books, in which the reader is speaking and the text appears on screen at the same time, can help support reading skills. Our test reader-listeners appreciate that there are no extra sounds, only the voice of the reader. They can focus on both the voice and the text while watching the video.

Concentration is the main concern for a listener-reader of an Easy audio book.

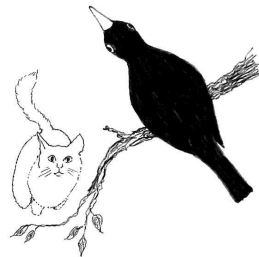


Illustration from Marianne Stahlberg's book *A hundred poems* (2017)

E-books

Do readers receive the same reading experience from a paper book and an electronic (e-)book? Yes, but the preference for either format is usually a question of personal tastes and reading habits.

Those who are mainly surfing on the internet – and for whom reading a paper book is often unthinkable – might feel more comfortable with electronic books at first. The adaptation process happens in the opposite direction, too: someone, who is used to printed books and starts reading e-books, requires time to adapt and learn the technology. Nowadays many people read in both formats.

From an e-book the reader can take the step to a printed book and vice versa. Both formats are needed today.

Traditionally, Easy-to-read books are published with hard covers. They should smell and rustle; the pages can easily be turned over to check how long chapters are, and to obtain a general overview. Paper books do not affect the eyes like screens do, and they are never connected to the internet, or distract attention.

Paper books have numerous benefits, but Easy-to-read books are increasingly published in electronic format, too. E-books are easy to download and read on phones, tablets, and computers. They only take up space in the machine's memory, and the reader can effortlessly transfer books to another device. Modern devices can store hundreds, even thousands of titles. Growing numbers of people, including children and youth, are reading electronically today, and therefore also the demand for Easy e-books will increase.

In e-books the outlook of the text, its size, contrast and colours can be adjusted; bookmarks, comments and other elements can be added and shared over the internet; and the reader has the possibility to quickly and smoothly search for facts and difficult words, if the machine is connected to the internet.

Easy-to-read books must follow the technological developments in order to remain attractive to the readers.



Illustration from
Philip and the shadow (2019)

But to get an overview of an e-book is not as simple as with a paper book, because the reader has to swipe or click forwards and backwards. The chapter length is also not very clear and page numbers are rare. The background often shines with blue light; according to researchers this can cause sleeplessness, because the brain is tricked into alertness. This problem has been solved by night or dark mode in newer mobile phones and tablets, and a special e-book “ink” with only grey nuances in e-book readers.

For producers of Easy-to-read books, the question of digital format is crucial. Several e-reading apps and computer programmes reshape the text and the Easy-to-read design disappears. Therefore we have decided to publish our books as PDF, which keeps the original layout, so every page looks exactly like in the printed book. All Easy-to-read elements remain in their place – font, line breaks, line spacing, margins, etc.

To create even more instructive, exciting e-books, we can add pictures, links, multimedia, explanations of words, and all kinds of other elements. But Easy books must be sparse and without add-ons disrupting a reading process, so elements are mostly published separately. Easy e-books should, like the paper books, give the reader a fair chance to focus on the text.

Easy-to-read and learning

Acquiring new knowledge becomes easier when the information is presented in Easy Language and in a clear way.

All literature used in education today is expected to support learning, and borders between subjects are becoming increasingly blurred. As a result, the need for books offering multifaceted contents is growing. Easy books can be used on all levels in education and for various topics. A format we created especially for learning is the Pedagogical Easy-to-read, in which we combine facts with adventures.

The attitude of the teacher towards Easy literature influences the opinions of the pupils about the books. When Easy literature is used at school, it is of utmost importance that teachers first read and connect with the books. These experiences and their knowledge of Easy-to-read are conveyed to the pupils, and motivate also the pupils to read Easy books. The engagement of teachers creates a positive attitude towards reading in general: literature can spark thoughts, emotions, and

opinions; therefore books are worth reading, and it is valuable to invest time in experiencing them.

Pedagogical Easy-to-read

Pedagogical Easy-to-read is a form of Easy-to-read we created to support the goals of school education. This concept which Team Bokpil began developing in 2015 is based on an insight that contents do not necessarily have to be overly simplistic in an Easy book, although the language is easy and the mechanical reading runs smoothly. Pedagogical Easy books present academic, cognitive, and emotional challenges for learners, but they can also be read as exciting adventures only.

All information in Pedagogical Easy-to-reads come from research or school books, and the books contain cross-disciplinary topics and discussions about issues like environment, climate or artificial intelligence. All our books also ask questions about behaviour, ethics, choices, independent thinking, decisions, reflecting on issues from personal to global, and also processing fears, feelings, and reactions.

Pedagogical Easy books offer relevant information in a way readers can easily grasp and assimilate, and utilise directly in education and life. Presently, these

books function in several countries as extra reading, learning support, discussion materials, or group work inspiration, basis for projects, and creative activities for language learning, etc. They offer, among others, these possibilities:

- multilayered contents create multiple connections
- development of critical thinking, memory, various competences, and problem-solving skills
- processing crises and difficult situations
- support for language knowledge and language development

The contents in Pedagogical Easy-to-read books can be read in various ways and on many levels. We work a lot with the descriptions of scientific facts in Easy Language, often researching and processing data and information for many months before presenting it in a clear and understandable, but not an oversimplified way. All facts are checked by experts and test readers. Pedagogical Easy books all discuss current topics, but they are written so that they still feel fresh and can be read also after five or ten years or even more. They also support multiliteracy.

Multiliteracy = ability to read various kinds of texts

In Pedagogical Easy-to-reads there are many elements in the story on which a reader can “glue” the facts. In *Chased by Wolves* (2016), Egon meets two men, Enzo and Simon. This book describes the digestive system. In the Key section at the end, these men are revealed to be enzymes. Places, animals, plants, and events in addition to people all carry meanings in our books – climate zones reflect the way food travels through the human body, simultaneously explaining how forests change when we journey from north to south.

In every picture in *Chased by wolves* (2016), a wolf is hidden. The task is not only to find it, but also to describe the environment and elements in the illustration in detail.



The Key section at the end of our natural science and technical Easy-to-read books provides explanations, details, and terminology for those who want to know

more about various topics, understand contexts and check facts. Every reader decides how they want to read the book and where to start – with adventure or Key. Many people read the books several times over in order to discover different levels in the story, and the information we have hidden, because we challenge readers also by adding facts they can find maybe only during the second or following readings.

Natural sciences are probably the most demanding topics for us who create the books, and also for the readers. Complex interconnections and systems are common in nature; to understand them, much time and effort has to be invested. In the book *Follow the bird* (2016), discussing the brain and nervous system, the chest represents memory and the professor is the analytical ability. The girl Mia is consciousness, while Amy is free-flying thoughts in the form of a cockatoo.

'I will first open the chest,'
said the professor.

'Where did I put the key?'

The professor and Mia
started to search.

The professor chased away Amy
and lifted the lid to the chest.



It was unlocked.

'That is nice,'
smiled the professor.

Cover picture from *Follow the bird* (2016)

Pedagogical Easy-to-read books encourage:

- own initiatives
- exchange and activities
- stimulating curiosity
- motivation to continue reading
- interest in finding out more
- developing reading skills and comprehension

...and a lot more.

We creators of Easy literature can among other things contribute to education through production of books with high-quality Easy language and contents. But to answer to the needs of the field, we need a dialogue with users of Easy-to-read texts and materials. In our experience, frequent talks with educators and people working with learning, and learners, are of enormous importance to develop the Easy-to-read literature in directions which really serve the readers.

The dialogue between producers of Easy-to-read books and users is crucial for the development of Easy literature.

Learning to read

When learning to read, children benefit greatly from Easy books. The first book a child reads alone should preferably be a book the child can succeed with. That is why parents and teachers like to give an Easy book to beginners: they have often read the book together, and the child is familiar with the story and language. I have met several children in various countries, who have read a book of mine as first book, and remember it in detail.

The first book children manage to read on their own often leaves traces and deep memories they will carry with them for many years ahead.

Easy-to-read books contain compact stories, and after every chapter the events can be discussed. The books can also be used for creative work, such as drawing, singing, drama, or creating stories or illustrations:

What stories can be told about this illustration from Marianne Stahlberg's book *Dog and sofa* (2019)?



Sometimes it happens that a child gets “stuck” with a book, reading it over and over again. When learning to read, children stabilise reading skills by repeating. The book often contains topics appealing to the child, and there is a need to process issues or language. Lots of things have to happen and coordinate at the same time in young readers – eyes, brain, motor skills, etc. – and it may take time before reading becomes fluent.

Children who read more slowly at the beginning are likely to return to an already familiar Easy-to-read book which gives them a feeling of success, especially if school books or Standard Language literature are perceived as too difficult. It could be useful to present the child with another Easy book in this case, in order to diversify the reading process, and to discover new stories and more language diversity.

Developing perseverance

Perseverance and persistence are the foundations for functioning reading processes. Also learning requires persistence, but some learners might need milestones in order to continue reading. Easy books can be such landmarks. After reading one or more Easy books, the learner can maybe manage more demanding books.

Reading and learning difficulties are not the same, and should be clearly distinguished. Those who have reading difficulties do not necessarily experience also learning difficulties. Dyslectics, who receive adequate support and a chance to acquire knowledge in other ways than just by reading can be successful learners. Individuals with weaker memory and concentration difficulties are often very proficient in the mechanical reading, but learning is slow. All challenges with the reading process should always be mapped out and causes investigated, and then individual strategies for effective reading can be developed.

People with reading difficulties often need to work intensely with improving reading skills. Easy books support the development of perseverance, and via the Easy books, the readers also learn to handle texts and manage their own reading difficulties.

Critical thinking

The capacity for critical thinking can be enhanced by regular reading of various kinds of texts and sources. Education is expected to expand it, and all citizens in our society are supposed to be able to think critically. Source criticism is, however, a competence requiring practice.

Some readers of Easy books cannot read any other kinds of literature at all, so the knowledge presented in Easy-to-read literature must be accurate. That does not mean the books cannot contain imagination – of course they can, and should, too. An Easy text should start thought processes and fire imagination, inspire readers to look up facts, and help them become more critical about the daily flow of news and information.

In our Pedagogical Easy-to-reads, the development of critical, independent thinking, and the processing of various situations are constantly present as topics. The world is complicated, and each one of us has to learn to manage. For this reason our books are full of all kinds of creative solutions and encouragement to think, reflect, talk, discuss, research, and to sit down and solve the problems. When the ship is rocking, it is vital to know if a roll is caused by a tsunami or not,

as in *The quest for Kraken* (2016) – is it true what the captain says?

‘Tsunami! Watch out.
The second wave is bigger,’
shouted the captain.

The ship almost made a somersault.
‘There will be a third wave,’
the captain cried.
‘It is the biggest one.’

Literature can offer a wide range of tools to process difficult situations or crises. Readers encounter ideas and receive impulses about how to handle their own situation while reading about how other people react or solve their problems. To read about something in a book usually feels less dangerous than to confront a hard situation in real life, or to discuss a complicated issue with other people.

In *Fix the focus* (2019), which discusses the future and artificial intelligence, *plex*, combined computer-mobile phone eyeglasses of four friends start sending wrong signals to each other. A small dog is suddenly enormous and dangerous, causing total panic in one

of these friends, who never before has been afraid of dogs. How can she solve this fear?



Illustration from *Fix the focus* (2019)

Group work

Joint reading of an Easy book in a group can make the reading experience more interesting. In this kind of activity, every participant gets a chance to contribute with thoughts and opinions. Those who do not have enough tenacity to read otherwise are stimulated to develop more perseverance. Memory is enhanced by working with the book in various ways.

Easy books can be used as an inspiration for many different kinds of work: teamwork, thinking together about various topics... Possibilities for group work with Easy books are endless. Creative activities using contents, texts, and illustrations intensify the reading

experiences and inspire to further reading, and the readers might want to write, draw or create music by themselves, too.

Easy books can further be used as texts to describe, explain, initiate discussions, and support work with and prevention of complicated social situations like conflicts or bullying. The books raise questions about morals and ethics, emotions and relationships. In the complex situations it can be useful to read together in a group, and to set aside time and space for creative activities besides talking. Occasionally a person from outside the group could be invited to talk about the difficult issues. In some cases it is better to read and work individually with a book.

Human relationships and behaviours are so similar in different cultures that most readers of our books recognise certain situations. When I speak of bullying (in some languages also called mobbing) and give the books about this topic to readers in various countries, even those in whose language there is no word for it know what I am talking about. Bullying often looks completely different on the surface, but destructive group dynamics are the same everywhere.

Many readers finally discover the words to connect with their bullying experiences. An Easy-to-read book

about bullying, discrimination or other hard issues is useful both for the prevention and also when trouble already has started. For individuals who have been bullied or discriminated, books help sort out feelings and fears. For bullies, reading a book about bullying can become an eye-opener.

The book should however be chosen with care, so that it does not give tormentors new ideas about how to intensify the harassment. In the book *Philip and the net* (2016), we decided to keep the descriptions of cyber-bullying as short as possible; instead we focus on reactions of the people involved. A nude photo of Annie is posted to everyone in the class. The next day, Philip reacts during a provoking situation at school:

Philip hears how Annie
draws her breath.
He expects her to say something.
But Annie is silent.

Philip stands up.

He thinks of what Mum said,
when she saw the picture.
It is no joke, Mum said.

Language levels

Language levels indicate how easy the language is in an Easy-to-read book.

In Easy-to-read literature there are several systems to mark language levels. The levels have been created to guide readers to choose books which correspond to their language needs and individual language ability. Some readers prefer to remain at the level they think, know or are certain that they can manage on. Others choose a level that will challenge their vocabulary or language knowledge, or they select the level they wish to attain. A book with too difficult language could be perceived as exhausting or dull, and the book is never finished; on the other hand, a too easy language is not interesting to the reader.

At school, Easy-to-read books are often seen as one step towards reading “serious” literature and school books in Standard Language. The language levels play an important role, because they help the readers and teachers to identify which language levels work and what goals could be attained. The main aim is to read

a whole book. The language in the book must be such that readers understand the text, but also receive new impulses and broaden their vocabulary. The language levels are sometimes criticised for risking the reader getting “stuck” on a certain level and not moving on to more advanced literature; yet, some of the readers of Easy books achieve best reading results exactly on the level they have chosen.

How to define language levels?

Language levels are often seen as a measurement for readability. Easy books, especially those of the easiest levels, usually score highly when readability index is applied, because of short words and phrases. Yet, not only length, but also the meaning and frequency of the words, elements like sentence structure, line and chapter length, book design, and several other factors influence how easy it is to read in reality.

In Sweden, every publisher has created their own classifications for Easy-to-read, usually three to five levels. Standardisation of the language levels is called for, but nothing has happened as yet. The definitions are general and various, but a basic principle among publishers is that on the easiest level, the words and

phrases are shortest and simplest. On each following level the quantity of difficult words, sentence and line length, and numbers of subjugated sentences grow.

For some languages, language levels are not (yet) in use, among them Finnish. Bokpil is (so far) the only publisher in Finland who marks language levels in its books in all languages we publish. Bokpil levels are defined according to the following principles:

- 1 Easiest – short phrases, simple words
- 2 Easier – longer phrases, more difficult words
- 3 Easy – long phrases, complex words

Bokpil language levels define no target or age groups, nor expected language knowledge; these criteria are only linguistic. On level 1, it is way too challenging to describe a complex phenomenon like pollution of the world oceans because of the special terminology. On level 2, there is the possibility to use certain specific words or expressions. Level 3 is already much closer to Standard Language, but still keeps to shorter lines and sentences. In a couple of new books in 2022, we introduced two additional levels to help readers and teachers:

- 4 Standard Language
- 4+ Advanced Language

These additional levels are despite their names still a type of Easy-to-read levels, as the language is simpler than in Standard Language literature. On level 4+ also scientific terminology is used. In both levels, the lines are not as short as in the previous three easy levels, and there is more white space on the page. The words and expressions have been selected carefully to make the reading process easier.

A comparison of texts on the same language level shows that they vary a lot in terms of word choice and structure, depending on the book topic and contents. Naturally, in every book there are many paragraphs, phrases or words that could be classified as another level. A dialogue is often easier than the general level of the book, and explanations may be more difficult. When we decide about language level for a book, it is the big picture that counts, and the language level our test readers perceive for the specific book. With every new book we create, the language level definitions are refined and redefined.

These excerpts from *Philip and the spider* (2022) show how the language levels differ from each other:

Level 1

The school is more than
a hundred years old.
Even Philip's mother went
to the same school.

Old things and buildings
can become mouldy.
But can mothers get mildew?



Level 2

In the past few days there have been
rumours claiming that the air
in the school building is poor.

Some persons have fallen ill,
but we are investigating the reasons.

Level 3

The moisture is just in one part
of the house. We are discussing with
construction companies about pulling down
only the damp wall in the canteen.
School activities can continue as usual.

Level 4

The building has great cultural and historical value for our region and must be preserved.

It can be renovated only by specialists, because there are many original walls.

Level 4+

The town has now to start a new round of offers for renovation of the school house.

Recent revelations make it impossible for the town's decision-makers to discuss, and even less to accept any offers made by companies so far.

Bokpil statistics for book sales since 2015 show that all language levels are needed. The equal distribution of readers indicates that all five levels are interesting for them, and it is therefore important to offer Easy literature on several language levels. The feedback we have received over the years tell that the level marks are important. We also observe that many readers like to choose a book on a more difficult language level if

the contents appeal to them. Therefore it is essential not to be too rigid when defining recommendations for language levels.

Choosing language level

When the moment for choosing language level comes certain questions must be answered by author, editor and publisher:

- How do the contents of the book, layout, and topic influence the language level?
- Which criteria should be used for the decision about the language level of this book?
- How can the language level be adjusted?
- Is it better to change the level than to adapt it?

Easy-to-read books need not only editors, but also test readers. Their reactions and comments often move a book to another language level. Our test readers come from various language and cultural backgrounds, and they have diverse reading skills and challenges. Some of our books have switched levels just before going to print, because test readers considered the manuscript too difficult. More seldom they find the texts too easy.

Some publishers define language levels for certain groups according to their supposed needs. But needs are mainly individual: each of us reads, understands, and processes texts in our own ways, and we all have our very personal interests, knowledge, experiences, and motives for reading. If hundred individuals read the same text, there are hundred ways to assimilate, process, and understand it. So are the language level criteria relevant, then?

The guidelines for Easy-to-read language levels are flexible. Too strict rules will only suffocate the language.



Illustration from *Float on the wave* (2018)

Uniform criteria for language levels are very difficult to create – if not impossible. Easy Language is always changing and being updated, and if the criteria are too rigorous, the language risks to become stiff and uninteresting. Where is the balance between defining criteria and a living language, attractive for readers?

Readers with high language awareness might find an Easy-to-read text austere and simple, because it is not written in “fine” Standard Language. But a reader with challenges or limited language knowledge does not appreciate subtleties or elegant language twists, and also does not react at the lack of “fine” language. For a reader who struggles, it is far more important to focus on the text and understand what is being read. The reader wants first and foremost to succeed with the reading, persevere with reading until the end, and to comprehend the contents. A significant goal can be to manage reading a whole chapter or a book.

The publisher guidelines for language levels which exist today work, and are continually being developed and improved. Writers, editors, and test readers also gather knowledge and experiences, contributing thus to the development and nuances of language levels. Although publisher language levels vary greatly, the readers undoubtedly find books on the levels they can manage. In our experience, the suitability of a book depends mainly on the reader’s interest for the topic – far more than on the language level specified by the publisher.

Language level or age group?

A question we are often asked is, would it not be more effective in Easy books to have age recommendations instead of language levels. Age is not always a reliable definition, however: children learn to read differently both in terms of pace and methods, and their reading skills develop individually. Some Easy-to-read books are directed mainly at children or youth, but many of the books can be read by any age group. Plastic litter in oceans is a current topic, and even children under school age know what it is, so a book like *Float on the wave* (2018) can be read with children, if the words or concepts unknown to them are explained. But *Philip and the shadow* (2019) requires that readers know the school environment, because this specific book talks about study guidance for pupils and students.

The words we hear and read in everyday life seem easy, but the ways we use them vary along the lines of among others language skills, age, environment and communication. Some words disappear from use, but new ones constantly emerge. Easy Language develops with Standard Language, and this occasionally causes books to be re-edited or rewritten to become current and to reflect the language now used in society.

The individual views of what is really easy to read often vary quite a lot.

Developments in society could also call for an update of a book: a target group has gained more knowledge, or values change. In the original version of *Miranda* (2001), Mira loses her headband in the dolphinarium. Fifteen years later, headbands were out of fashion but everyone talked about bullying. Mira was updated to lose her keys instead, and her speech became modern Easy Language. She now thought more about bullying and group relationships, because we estimated that readers needed less explanation about what bullying is. Mira's popularity – this is our most translated book – and reader reactions show that the reworking of the book was successful.

Some Easy-to-read books could need updating to be understood by and appeal also to the reading audiences of today.

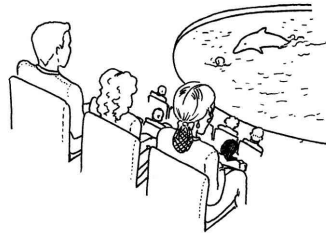


Illustration from *Miranda* (2016)

Easy-to-read diversity

Easy-to-read books support language development for all readers – not only for learners of a new language. Humans develop language skills also in their mother tongues throughout life. Therefore it is important for Easy Language, too, to offer language impulses to all readers, both those who read in their mother tongues and to language learners.

The language in Easy books should be deliberately planned and formulated, so that it can be understood also by readers with a different language background. Slang, dialect, and other specific elements should be avoided, or must be explained if used. In our books we use international English: we always consider that the text should be understood by people who speak or learn English anywhere in the world.

Easy-to-read books can also be a support for those who are starting to read in a specific language, or do not yet read in all languages they speak. Multilingual learners might be able to read only in one or two of their languages. Those who already speak a language can usually acquire the reading skills in this language fairly quickly, but if the reading still feels arduous, it

could be useful to check if the reader has any reading difficulties, dyslexia, or other reading challenges.

Easy-to-read books can make language and cultural education more fun, and engage the participants in discussions and joint activities.

When I teach multilingual groups with the assistance of Easy literature, my goals are to make learning the language more interesting, and to increase language awareness in the participants – both of their own and the other participants’ languages. If they do not have to perform or show off their skills, but we just read and discuss the text and their thoughts, shyness and fear to speak the new language disappear. Often Easy-to-read as a format is new for them, and people often ask if the text is a poem, because of the short lines. The teacher has to explain what Easy Language is and adapt the work with the text to the age and language knowledge of the group. Pictures or drama – acting out different scenes together – could be useful for younger participants, in addition to explanations and talks; this helps everyone in the group to understand the text.

Learning new languages

Using Easy-to-read books together with textbooks in language teaching makes several things happen:

- learning languages becomes more interesting
- emotional bonds are created to languages
- learning is faster and more natural
- the feeling of successful learning grows

Easy-to-read literature is used in language education in many countries in schools and with adult language learners. Easy books are very useful for multilingual groups and also in language courses for professional proficiency. Language learning becomes even more productive, when a whole book is read and discussed over an extended period, and everyone in a group is working together on the topics of the book.

Language learning and awareness are enhanced by reading books parallel in at least two languages. It is easier to see similarities and differences in languages and to observe how the same things can be expressed if two or more texts are next to each other. The work of the brain is facilitated; it can create new “language channels”, like radio channels, much faster.

Compare these excerpts from *Philip in the tunnel* (2016) in Swedish and English – how do the versions differ, and what is the same?

Swedish

Jag börjar tänka på mat.
Jag föreställer mig,
att jag äter stekt potatis.

Nej! Jag får inte
tänka på mat.
Jag blir bara hungrigare,
då jag tänker på att äta.

English

I start thinking about food.
I imagine eating
fried potatoes.

No! I must not
think about food.
I only get hungrier,
when I think about eating.

One of my most downloaded Easy books is called the *Multicoloured book* (2020, Swedish original *Brokiga boken*, 2019). Its topic is moving to another culture and situations newcomers commonly encounter. The texts, tasks, and questions in the book are written in three language levels.

The book is often used at intercultural courses and integration and language education of migrants. We have received feedback from teachers and learners, who find level 1 easy enough even for beginners. Most readers recognise themselves and read on with great interest.

Multicoloured book starts with the language level 1 and chapter *Everybody asks*, a well-known situation for anyone who has moved to another country. How would you answer these questions?

Everybody asks me:
What is your name?
Where do you come from?
Why are you here?

They also ask:
What language do you speak?
Where is your home?
Why are you not there?

Multilinguals and Easy-to-read

In society and education, we are all supposed to have only one first language – a single mother tongue. But modern reality is that lots of people are multilingual since childhood. They can switch effortlessly between multiple languages and create their own routines for learning new languages. They easily become bored at courses, because they can pick up languages faster. It is more interesting and motivating for such learners

to directly begin reading Easy-to-read books parallel with the language textbook.

Translanguaging = using all language resources in communication with oneself and others

Translanguaging is becoming popular also in schools, but it is not enough only to speak a language. Persons with multiple languages need reading habits in all of their languages. During their years at school, pupils spend a total of thousands of hours acquiring school language and other languages. If they do not exercise also reading and writing in a language, this language often remains on an early childhood level. Knowledge of more languages in depth influences thinking, well-being, and personal development of the individual.

Multilingual persons should have the possibility to enrich all languages parallel and to the same intense degree, but schools or families can seldom offer such an ideal situation. Usually one or some languages get less attention or no time at all. Easy books can be a gateway to begin reading also in the other languages, together with studying them for example on distance

over the internet, talking with others who speak the same language, and using digital materials.

Easy-to-read books can open doors
to reading in languages
for which reading habits are lacking.

Translation is an effective method to dive deeper into a language. In a multilingual group, it is especially important to discuss about how words or expressions can be translated, so that everyone gets a chance to expand their understanding of the various languages, concepts, and ideas. Texts in Easy Language are very simple to translate with their linguistic clarity; thus, they are also well suited for group work.

Multilingual learners might need to assimilate new materials first in one of their languages before they read about the same topic in a school book. Knowing the meaning or contents helps, when they work with the same concepts in school language. Learners with limited school language knowledge can develop their reading skills by training mechanical reading in one of the languages they speak, before embarking upon another one. They need support, suggestions about books, and aid in finding various channels for talks

about books in their languages, among other things, encouragement to read and knowledge about how to improve reading skills through Easy-to-read.

Multicultural Easy-to-read

To create multicultural Easy-to-read books in several languages was a natural decision and a consequence of the fact that both Maria and I are multilingual with multicultural identities, families, friends, students, and interests. We are switching daily between several languages, cultures and perspectives; this is reflected also in our books. All books and activities, including websites, extra materials and video channels, appear in multiple languages, expressing the multicoloured and multifaceted worlds we are living in.

To the majority of humanity, Easy-to-read is still an unknown concept. The organisations promoting Easy Language in different countries generally work only within state borders, and their contacts with actors abroad mainly aim at exchanging experiences, not to spread Easy-to-read to new languages or countries. This is why I have started initiatives for international Easy-to-read activities and books focusing on multicultural issues: all our Easy-to-read books are created

in a way to make them readable and understandable almost anywhere in the world.

At school, pupils with other cultural backgrounds frequently perceive textbook contents as foreign and not reflecting their own reality. What do they need to recognise themselves in a book? Should literature be targeted and directed to specific ethnic, language, or cultural groups? Or could the same book function in diverse cultures?

Standard Language books mostly for children and youth are nowadays being criticised if they focus just on the (white) majority. But the same criticism is valid for books focusing on a certain skin colour, religion, culture etc. Neither one, nor the other kind of books is multicultural, although “ethnic” books are labelled as such in several countries. Multicultural pedagogy, often understood as a way to foster understanding for other cultures, mostly focuses on cultural differences and reinforce preconceived opinions and prejudices.

Real multicultural literature are books,
which can be read and understood
independently of the readers' background.

Multicultural literature contains elements that all can recognise, and which are not limited to a culture. The reader identifies with places and characters, but outlook, origins or other outer aspects are irrelevant: personality is more important. That is why we have chosen not to show faces if possible. Readers should decide what the main characters look like, and not fix their attention on outward aspects of the characters.

Philip and the shadow
(2019) presents study
and learning techniques.

In the illustrations, Philip
is only a silhouette, so he
can take on any aspect
the reader chooses.



Also the elements and environment are recognisable. When a book concentrates on the common aspects instead of elements that divide people from various backgrounds, the reader gets a possibility to recreate the world of the book, so that it reflects the reader's own reality. Events, behaviour models and the human relationships, and emotions are all such that anyone can find, encounter and experience them practically

anywhere in this world. The environment of course varies depending on the book topic, but if the reader has not experienced for instance snow, eruption of a volcano, tsunami or desert personally, one task could be to look up photos and facts about the phenomena on the internet.

Feedback from readers, and experiments we have carried out in different countries and environments, demonstrate that our multicultural books function in both urban surroundings and in villages. Children in village schools in Europe even identify, based on their own experiences, the small town where Philip lives.

We also choose short and simple names which can be adapted to local names or translated: Philip, Hugo, Mimi, Mira... Now and then, like for the mathematics genius Amir appearing in *Philip and the snow* (2016), we chose a common regional name, but do not reveal exactly from where Amir had to flee. The reader must focus on his personality instead of on questions like where he comes from or why he is behaving so oddly. Preconceived attitudes influence much too often how people treat others, and this book aims at raising a whole range of questions about how we can learn to see the real person.

Easy-to-read for language revitalisation

Language revitalisation means to support and revive a language with few speakers or an extinct language. There are hundreds of endangered languages in the world. In the moment a language is no longer spoken or used, a huge diversity of knowledge and traditions disappear, and then also access of the descendants to their history and background.

Endangered languages = the number of speakers is small and diminishing, and the languages are in danger of disappearing

Easy-to-read books can support the revitalisation of languages, and increase the use of languages. Many people are not accustomed to reading in their family language, which is maybe spoken by a small minority or group only. They have been educated in another language at school, and lack practice in their home language. There is also a need for modern books to attract the readers of today – old works might seem too strange both in terms of language and the topics. Through Easy literature, the speakers of endangered languages get a chance to create solid reading habits.

They find courage to read more in their language and maybe even start writing themselves.

Tatar is now spoken by less than a thousand people in Finland. Mishar Tatar is a western dialect of the Turkic language Tatar. The dialect spoken in Finland should in fact be called Finland Tatar, because it has developed in a different direction than Mishar for the past century. Tatars in Finland are all multilingual, and children mostly learn to read and write Tatar at a weekend school. A project we started in 2019 had six Easy-to-read books translated into Tatar. The pupils at the school engaged directly with Philip: they found favourite books and had lively discussions about what he should do or how he should react. Interest in the language increased and the children wanted more.

We work in Finland Swedish, so taking the step to other minority languages is simple. Globally our work using Easy-to-read literature for supporting minority and endangered languages is unique, and the projects have received international acclaim among scholars and readers. The positive results and interest in Tatar-language books raises hopes for publishing the Easy books in other minority and endangered languages, too, and for supporting both language learning, and increased use of languages threatened by extinction.

Developing Easy-to-read

Easy-to-read is the result of more than fifty years of work done by thousands of people, who have created texts which can be understood by most people in the society. Easy literature is constantly being developed and adapted to new reader groups. In the early period authors would avoid difficult issues, because it was supposed that Easy-to-read should only provide for good reading experiences. Now feelings, thoughts and experiences, emotions and life events, conflicts, love and sorrows can appear, because Easy books are not any longer expected to deal only gently with readers, but also to support them in solving issues.

Requirements for the contents and different formats of Easy-to-read literature multiply together with the growing need for Easy-to-read texts in society.

Today, global developments are going towards more multimedia and less text to read. This means that we must learn to orientate ourselves and to use various forms of texts, pictures, and sound. Easy literature is

expected to answer to a growing need of Easy texts, while at the same time the books have to follow these trends in order to appeal to readers. Nowadays Easy books are complemented with texts, pictures, tasks and extra materials on the internet, and often also videos, games or other formats.

Through working with literature in different ways, readers acquire both language and knowledge from the texts. But multimodal Easy literature is needed if we want to capture those who do not read at all and those whose language knowledge is so limited that for them reading is an almost impossible task.

Multimodal text = combines different types of media (sound, pictures, etc.)

How can we develop Easy-to-read, so that also those who do not touch a book are tempted to discover the joy and usefulness of reading? Researchers could give more information and details about how Easy-to-read literature and texts are being perceived, understood and processed by different kinds of readers, and how various formats and combinations of texts with visual tools function together during the reading process.

Developing language

Easy Language was still quite stiff twenty years ago, but growing amounts of books, experiences and also research induced it to turn flexible. This will probably happen also with Finnish and other languages, where still the criteria are strict. Easy Language follows the development in society, and new words and concepts are included in the Easy books, just like in Standard Language literature. But how Easy Language evolves depends much on those who write, edit and translate the books: in the languages for which we created new Easy Languages – Bulgarian, Serbian and Tatar, so far – we worked best with translators who possessed both experience and knowledge of Easy-to-read, and who had written or modified texts in Easy Language.

Developing contents

Easy-to-read books follow modern trends and appeal today to far more readers than ever before. Yet, at the same time there is a need for timeless books, readable still ten or twenty years from now; they must not lose their freshness of language or contents. Producers of Easy books must constantly challenge themselves and

explore new paths for developing Easy-to-read texts. Further, a broader discussion and far more research are required to map how Easy books are understood and used by different kinds of readers.

Developing quality

Does the growing Easy-to-read literature really meet the requirements of the market? How does the price relate to quality? We need research and statistics, but an important insight is that Easy literature does not compete on the same market with Standard Language books. Its readers do not necessarily buy Easy books, but borrow them from libraries. Easy-to-read titles seldom turn into commercial successes; one reason is that the publishers possess fewer resources for the marketing than Standard Language publishers. It will take some years until we see posters for Easy crime or novels on bus stops and in bookshop windows.

To enable the publishing of Easy-to-read literature also in the future, to keep book prices within normal limits and quality high, financial and moral support from public and private bodies are required. After all, Easy-to-read is a manifestation of the rights of each participant in society to get information, accessibility,

participation, a right to read and possibility to enjoy a reading experience. In addition to funding, education at university level, experience of working with Easy-to-read, international exchange, and for example job shadowing and student internships are needed.

Developing translations

Easy-to-read books are being translated into various languages increasingly often. Today not only readers in diverse language environments and cultures have access to new books broadening their views, but also language learners are offered possibilities to develop their linguistic skills. Extra funding for translations could encourage more publishers to translate and sell translation rights to Easy publishers abroad.

Developing pictures and layout

The reaction of many people, who see an Easy-to-read book for the first time, is that the simple design and black-and-white illustrations are unattractive in this world where “all” books are brightly coloured. After we explain to them, most understand that it is easier to decode short lines and simple pictures, and that

the reading process works better if the book page is plain and clear.

How can Easy-to-read illustrations and layout be developed to become more attractive? What happens with the readability of the text? When does a picture or a layout stop being easy to decode? Do Easy books really need to compete with the picture books? Those who could answer are probably researchers, but more experiments and more work in the Easy-to-read field are required, if we want to understand the readability issues and how reader perceptions function.

Developing research

Globally, research on Easy-to-read has a short history. Despite the fact that the numbers of researchers are on the increase, the quantity of scientific publications is still very limited. There are handbooks and articles, but they are usually much too academic to be used in the field. Pedagogues, therapists and others working with Easy-to-read require easily understandable and concrete descriptions and clear recommendations. Researchers must also produce Easy texts themselves and work with readers in order to observe how Easy-to-read functions outside the academic environment.

Many topics connected with Easy-to-read are still waiting to be discovered by scholars from various disciplines. European Union and several states have realised the benefits of Easy Language and Easy-to-read, and fund projects promoting both activities and research. Research should further be extended into new disciplines; literature scholars and linguists are getting interested, but still most publications appear in the field of pedagogy. Easy-to-read is a fascinating research topic, however, and it can certainly interest researchers from other academic fields, too, such as brain research, etc.

Team Bokpil has carried out several projects and experiments in some countries with ophthalmologists and early childhood educators, teachers, multilingual groups and others. But because our research has been done without the presence of a qualified researcher of Easy-to-read, or in conditions that scholars do not accept, results of our experiments are not considered academically valid. We have, however, gathered a lot of interesting materials and observations in the field, which partly have been used in scholarly publications and theses, and which can be utilised as inspiration for further research.

Developing awareness in society

Several organisations, publishers and authorities are fulfilling an extremely important task by distributing information about Easy-to-read and Easy Language in society. Many people have worked for decades, and thanks to them Easy Language and Easy-to-read have received more attention and understanding. In some countries there are laws including Easy Language. All these factors raise awareness about it and the need for further education, experts and researchers.

Media plays an important role for the visibility and prestige of Easy-to-read in society. Through visibility in mass media, chances grow that persons who need Easy Language also find Easy books and websites, and that Easy-to-read becomes more acceptable in their eyes, and also in the opinion of other people. Several media already publish news in Easy Language, but for example book reviews and interviews with authors, discussions about Easy literature on TV and radio, or articles in newspapers and on internet could increase interest for, and distribution of Easy-to-read literature in society. Popular scientific articles about research could further raise the prestige of Easy Language and Easy-to-read.

Easy-to-read in perspective

We at Bokpil have had many possibilities to develop and try out different innovative ways of working with Easy-to-read, and to explore topics which both appeal to and challenge us and readers. Imagination alone limits our work with Easy-to-read.

In the future, Easy-to-read will hopefully get much more understanding and acceptance, not only in the literary studies, mass media, society, education, and academic research, but also with writers, illustrators, publishers, and readers. But first and foremost Easy books must find their path to the readers. The readers and their reading experiences and enjoyment while reading are what matter most.

Reading is a pleasure:
Read different kinds
of books and
expand the menu.

Enjoy your reading!



Illustration from *The heart of the cook* (2018)

Bokpil

Easy-to-read & Multilingual

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bokpil.eu

- Information and news about Easy-to-read
- Blog about reading and Easy Language

Villa Bokpil

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- Easy-to-read books
- Free e-books on various topics



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- Free extra materials
- Tasks and activities

Easy-to-read books are increasingly popular in schools and homes today.
Why do we need literature in Easy Language?
How can we use the books for teaching and learning?
What is Pedagogical Easy-to-read?
How can multilingual and multicultural readers benefit from Easy books?

Writer and researcher Sabira Stahlberg talks about her experiences and offers tips and ideas for the use of Easy literature in various situations. Sabira has worked with Easy-to-read for more than twenty years and written more than two dozen books in Easy Language.



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