



# Creating and using Easy-to-read books

Blog by Sabira Stahlberg in collaboration with Maria Viitasalo

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# 1. Writing Easy-to-read books

*Writer, researcher and international lecturer Sabira Stahlberg, PhD, has written two dozen Easy-to-read books and close to a hundred academic, popular science and fiction works. In 2001, Sabira's first Easy-to-read book Miranda was published, followed by several **innovative** and pedagogical Easy-to-read books on various topics, from climate change to artificial intelligence.*

*What inspires an academic and fiction author to write Easy-to-read books?*

**Sabira:** In the beginning I was mainly curious about how an Easy-to-read text is created, what **processes** happen in my brain and how readers perceive my writings. Easy Language texts can be understood in different ways by various readers. Then I became interested in the challenge of writing in an easily comprehensible way about **complex** and difficult topics. In my scientific texts, I often have to explain with complicated words. When I write Easy texts, I need to process and compress the information differently.

This requires **deepening knowledge** and that I really understand what I am writing about. The subject is often far away from my cultural and language research and background. Physics, chemistry, ecology and computer technology and other topics might take **months of reading, experimenting and research**, until I have enough knowledge and understanding to write.

*How does creating an Easy-to-read book differ from other books?*

**Sabira:** The writing process is fairly similar. I read, think and write for days, weeks, months. The difference is that I use shorter lines and easier words in Easy-to-read texts. My first books required more editing but now I can **write directly in Easy Language**.

For Easy books I do not need to think so much about describing places or persons. I can concentrate on the **story** and **events**. They should be exciting and at the same time provide information. Descriptions are concise and clear. An Easy text provides only as much explanation as needed to provoke thoughts and imagination in the reader.

Important is that the book encourages to read. It should always be readable and attract different kinds of readers of all age groups. Therefore I work a lot on creating texts with **several story levels**.

*How do readers react?*

**Sabira:** Each book runs through a long process after I have prepared the manuscript. The illustrator Maria Viitasalo and teachers check the **pedagogical** aspects. Test groups consisting of readers from various age groups and with different reading needs **comment** and give their views. After this I edit the manuscript several times and often rewrite parts until the text feels right. Before going to print, and I translate the book from Swedish to English. **Translation** is an effective way to find errors.

I receive regular **feedback** from readers and teachers in various countries. My main observation is that each reader or group experience the books **individually**. The same book can trigger very different **reactions** and answer to various **needs** and **interests**. My goal is to create books which can be read by all, or at least by most people, regardless of age, knowledge, interests or experience.

## 2. Easy-to-read illustrations

*In Easy-to-read books, not only text but also **illustrations** must be easy to decode. In comparison with other books, it might appear that Easy books contain too few pictures. When Easy-to-read works are compared with colourful picture books for children the difference becomes obvious. People who for the first time see Easy books therefore often suppose them a little more boring. The aim of Easy books is however to **support** and **encourage reading**. That is why both the book **design** and illustrations are simple and clear. The reader can concentrate on the text.*

In a book with many illustrations, the human eye “reads” mainly the pictures. Research shows that the text gets little or no attention. Picture books are important, but in order to develop reading skills and reading, another kind of layout is required to enable better focusing on the text.

When we read a page, black and white pictures reduce the **impulses** the reading eye receives. The eye can follow a line from beginning to end without obstacles. We read the text **without distraction** from lots of other elements.

The page layout of Easy books includes large margins and much **free space**. The pictures are placed outside the text or on a **separate page**. The reader gathers information both from the text and the picture, yet without mixing them. The ability to **decode** both forms of knowledge is developed more effectively when they can be processed separately.

### The picture talks

In pedagogical Easy-to-read books illustrations support the story. **Visual versions** of persons, places and events offer the reader a possibility to anchor the reading experience in the real world. At the same time the pictures tell **their own story** broadening the understanding of the text.

The pictures must, though, not be explicit. They should not fix the book’s world to one environment or give characters a specific face. For example in the Philip series, people are mostly shown from the side or from behind. Readers can **create their own images** of the characters, which makes it easier for them to identify with persons or situations.

Where to **place** pictures in an Easy book is a decision requiring precise planning. The picture must not come before the event. It should be near the topic it relates to. Still, it should not reveal surprises too early, and it must fill its function of **supporting** the text.

### Structure and content

Some Easy-to-read illustrations are created like **comic strips**: the same picture might reflect events from several chapters, especially if the chapters are very short. The reader can for example write their own stories or dialogues about the pictures.

Other illustrations show only one element. The aim is to **clarify** the text or show something existing in our environment. In **natural science** books, the text contains more facts and the reader needs to digest the information. Graphically simple pictures are then more appropriate.

For all Easy-to-read pictures one principle applies: **easy to decode**. The pictures should also have their own thoughts and convey their own visual story.

### 3. Easy e-books – same reading experience?

*Easy-to-read books are mostly supposed to be only paper books, but how do Easy e-books function? Do they offer the same reading experience? What are the challenges for the reader?*

*E-books are increasingly common. What kind of possibilities can digital books offer? The question of e-book versus paper book is for many readers a matter of habit or taste, yet for unaccustomed or weak readers it may be difficult to decide.*

Paper book or e-book?

A paper book **feels** differently than an e-book, while an e-book has the advantage that the text can be **enlarged** to the desired size.

It is easy to **turn over pages** in a paper book and quickly see how long for example chapters are. In an e-book the reader must **click** back and forth to understand the length.

For someone who mostly reads short texts on the internet, an e-book may be the **first step** to read a whole book. Bokpil's pedagogical Easy-to-read books are as e-books since 2016 and are today freely available. Our experiences and feedback from readers show that e-books can create the **same emotional reactions and reading experiences** as paper books. Depending on the reader's previous experience and technological skills, some **adaptation time** might be needed. This applies also to readers unaccustomed to reading paper books.

Format

Team Bokpil has decided to make Easy e-books mainly in **PDF format**. Experiments with EPUB and other formats showed that Easy-to-read texts do not function well in other existing formats.

In PDF files, short lines, line distances and breaks, fonts and other important elements which make the text easy to read are preserved. The page looks like in a **printed** Easy-to-read book with much white space. In formats like EPUB all these specific characteristics are lost and the text becomes more difficult to decipher and decode.

Digital books offer new possibilities including **links**, extra **information**, word **explanations** and **multimedia**. These might however **disturb** the reading process, because concentration is drawn away from the text. When extra materials and tasks are published for instance at the end of a chapter or separately from the text, the reader has more possibilities and space to improve both the reading skills and reading comprehension.

Each reader is an individual who reads in their own **individual** way and has personal reading needs. Elderly and people with low vision may have difficulties reading paper books and for them an e-book reader could continue to provide reading experiences. People who spend a lot of time sitting in front of the computer may need a paper book to rest their eyes and enjoy reading. Today we have the unique possibility to read books in different formats.

It is important that also Easy-to-read books are **accessible** in electronic form.

## 4. Audio books: reading with the eyes – and ears?

*Audio books are becoming increasingly popular today. Sweden is one of the countries where the industry has grown most rapidly and listening to audio books is called “reading with the ears”. Teachers and experts recommend audio books for persons who are unaccustomed to reading and to unmotivated children and teenagers who never even touch a book. Instead of reading with the eyes, many now listen to books. But does it develop the brain as much as reading with the eyes? How does listening affect reading skills?*

**Reading aloud** is important for children’s language development even after they have learned to read by themselves according to recent research. Yet, an important difference between reading aloud and an audio book is that when parents read to their children, there is **interaction** and an **exchange** of opinions and thoughts.

Reading aloud and discussing the book **develops language** to a high degree, as various language levels, language melodies, tones and language nuances are used. An audio book can also awaken thoughts and enrich language, but this happens without any **engagement** or **communication**. The listener is a receiver and not an actor.

When a child is learning to read, the brain starts to restructure and more **brain mass** is created. The eyes are **coordinated** with the processing of words and sentences in the brain. If the child continues to read and to train reading skills through different types of texts, also **thinking** and analytical skills will develop. The brain becomes faster in collecting information and **processing** it.

Reading skills are needed to function in society

Modern society requires **citizens who can read**. Persons with reading difficulties often experience problems in managing their affairs and functioning in society.

An increasing number of teenagers leave school with **weak reading skills**. Those who do not want to read or find reading too complicated can get into literature through audio books, but they should be **encouraged** to read paper books and e-books, too, and not only to listen. Easy-to-read books can support readers with challenges to develop reading skills which make reading **easier** and more **available**.

Audio books showing the text on the screen or which are being read **parallel** with a paper book or an e-book are an other possibility. Parallel listening and reading develops reading skills. Bokpil’s audio books are all published with the text.

Audio books prepared for persons who are unfamiliar with reading or have reading challenges **should not contain any extra elements** such as music or sound effects, because they disturb the reader’s concentration.

**In any case: it is not enough to just listen.**

**Everyone must also read in order to develop skills which are needed to function in society.**