Figure 5. The i.t.a. alphabet based on Helvetica.

Figure 6. The i.t.a. alphabet based on Optima.

Speed-reading Made Easy

W. S. Brown

This paper advocates and illustrates an unusual typography, which promises to make speed reading easier, faster, and more reliable. It is suggested that computers be used to prepare text in this form.

Most normal readers move their eyes across the page from left to right once for each line of text. In this mode the brain is sometimes able to process the information more rapidly than the eyes are able to transmit it. As a result the mind may wander, and there may be a significant loss of comprehension.

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The key to speed-reading, as taught in certain popular courses, is to take in several lines of text during each pass across the page. When this is done, the words are not transmitted in the proper order, and therefore the brain must either rearrange them or understand them out of order. To achieve still greater speed, the eyes pass from left to right with a downward slope, and the omitted regions are picked up on the return. Normal readers who receive training in speed-reading are often able to improve their reading speeds by factors of four or five, with equal or greater comprehension.

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Poulton[1] contends that speed-reading is accomplished not by storing information

faster, but by seeing it faster and storing less of it. In his view the skill is in selecting the appropriate information to store.

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Whatever the explanation for its effectiveness, speed-reading ought to be facilitated by any typography which permits the reader to absorb more words per fixation while reading them in their natural order. Many nonstandard typographies have been proposed,[2] including the vertical arrangement of words in columns as illustrated in the next sentence.

This
is
an
example
of
vertical
typography.

The present proposal is an apparently original compromise between the vertical and horizontal typographies.

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A complete $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches by 11 inches page of conventional single-spaced typewritten text contains about four thirds as many words as a complete page of text in this form. However, in the former case the page consists of 48 lines of length $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches, while in the latter case it consists of 5 columns of length 8 inches.

Thus the potential gain in words per fixation is a factor of

$$\frac{3}{4}\cdot\frac{48\cdot 25/4}{5\cdot 8}$$

or approximately 5.6.

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To test whether this new typography really does improve visual efficiency, comparative studies of speed, comprehension, and eye motion will be required. The negative results of Coleman and Hahn[3] concerning vertical typography may or may not be relevant, but in either case they are inconclusive since experienced readers may require considerable unlearning to profit from the new typography, while beginning readers (children) may not be able to read more than one word per fixation, no matter what the typography.

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It is important to realize that the possibility of using computers in the preparation of typed and printed documents has transformed the study of alternative typographies from an amusing diversion into an important practical undertaking. In many situations there are other potent reasons for involving the computer, and the advantages of speed-reading may well provide a decisive push in that direction.

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1. E. C. Poulton, "Rapid Reading," *Journal of Documentation* (London). *19*, (1963) 168–172.

2. Herbert Spencer, *The Visible Word*, Hastings House, 1969.

3. E. B. Coleman and S. C. Hahn, "Failure to Improve Readability with a Vertical Typography," *Journal of Applied Psychology. 50*, (1966) 435–436.