# Help! How do I support struggling readers? An introduction to accessible literacy and reading formats – Webinar transcript

Webinar date: November 12, 2024

## Land acknowledgement

00:00:00

**Rachel Breau:** Before we begin, I'd like to start with a brief land acknowledgment. So Denise, Faline, and I, we all live in Toronto on the traditional territory of the many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, Anishnabeg, Chippewa, and the Haudenosaunee peoples, and the Wendat peoples. The territory is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. This land is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Wherever we find ourselves today across Turtle Island, we can be grateful to the First Nations for their careful stewardship of this land.

## How can you help someone who is struggling to read?

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So this webinar today is a result of a new series of resource documents that CELA is creating regarding accessible libraries services, and the first in our Accessible Libraries series is talking about accessible literacy. And it highlights what we're going to tell you about today. So that's the many different reading formats that any reader can use to help develop their reading skills, which will also hopefully lead to an enjoyment of reading.

So while this document was written for library staff to answer the question, “How do you help a struggling reader if they come to the desk?” we knew that this knowledge about accessible formats goes beyond a library environment, and that it can apply to parents, to teachers, really anyone who is supporting a reader.

## Learning goals

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Today, we’ll talk to you about the different types of print disabilities and how their unique reading needs are affected by reading and the need for accessible formats. And we'll describe the accessibility features offered in those different reading formats to meet their reading needs and how they can contribute to their literacy development. We'll end the presentation by giving you some practical tips so that you can support readers yourselves.

## What is CELA?

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I'll tell you now a bit about CELA. So CELA is a comprehensive accessible library service providing over one million books, magazines and newspapers to people with print disabilities living in Canada. We are a national not-for-profit organization that provides accessible reading services to the approximately three million people across Canada with print disabilities.

Our services ensure that the people with print disabilities across the country are able to fully participate in learning, work and community life and contribute to the social, cultural, and economic development and success of their local and broader communities. It's CELA’s mission to support public libraries in the provision of accessible library collections, and also to champion the fundamental rights of Canadians with print disabilities so they can access materials in the format of their choice.

Our collection includes books for all ages and interests, and in English and French. So we have a bilingual collection, and we're a bilingual service as well.

We also offer another collection called Bookshare, which is a US library of accessible formats. So while registering for CELA does not require any kind of medical validation of your disability, patrons and educators with library cards from CELA member libraries would have to fill in a proof of disability form to access Bookshare titles. So that can be hard to remember, but basically, CELA, we don't need any kind of proof of disability. If you want Bookshare titles, then you do have to take that extra step and select that.

## Print disabilities

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The definition of a print disability comes from the Canadian Act-- Sorry, the Copyright Act of Canada, that allows an organization like ours to produce print materials in accessible formats for people with print disabilities.

A print disability is a disability that prevents or inhibits a person from reading a literary, musical, dramatic or artistic work in its original format. The three types of print disabilities include a learning disability like dyslexia, a physical disability where the person cannot hold or turn the pages of a book, or a severe visual disability.

To register for CELA, you can fill out our online registration form, which will ask for your public library card number. You can also register at public libraries that are CELA member libraries. In BC, most public libraries offer CELA access to both our physical and digital collections, but if your library is not a member, you may only download our audio, e-text, and braille books. On our registration form, we ask that the person self-declare that they have a proof-- that they have a print disability. We take this approach so that the person with a print disability can access the materials that they need in the format of their choice. An educator or another professional with a library card from a CELA member library can also get their own CELA account to support their students and clients.

## Reading difficulties

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We thought it would be helpful to define the terms “struggling reader” and “reluctant reader” and how print disabilities fits into this context. So a struggling reader is really a broad term to describe someone who has difficulty reading, which may involve experiencing challenges with one or more concepts such as fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, or even writing. So, for the purposes of our presentation, we'll use “struggling readers” to describe any reader who faces difficulties reading written text.

The next term, a “reluctant reader,” simply refers to a reader who doesn't like to read or tends to avoid it. Of course, there is a strong link between struggling readers and reluctant readers, since readers who may not wish-- readers may not wish to read if they find it very difficult to do. And then the other factor that can lead to reading difficulties and reluctance is a print disability. So the combination of these three factors can contribute to reading struggles, which actually can lead to a lack of self-esteem and confidence, and may even affect their overall education.

However, according to the International Literacy Association, kids, or even older readers who are just learning to read, can improve their reading skills with the right kind of instruction and classroom experience. And we really believe that using the right kind of accessible formats, which are often designed for people with print disabilities, will also support their ability to learn to read.

## Print material accessibility in Canada

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In 2023, Statistics Canada published the Print Material Accessibility in Canada study. They learned that 5.2 million Canadians indicated they had difficulty reading print materials, and 35% use alternative formats. The minimum age of the participants for the study was 15 years old, and the younger participants indicated that they were more likely than the older ones to ask for reading materials in accessible format.

So it's great to hear that the younger ones are advocating for the formats that they need. We have written a summary of this study in a blog post, which is on the CELA website, and in the email that I'll send following this presentation. It will include the link to the blog as well to the study itself.

Now I’ll pass it over--

**Denise Scott:** Thanks. Thanks, Rachel.

## Accessible literacy and why it matters

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So before we get into discussing specific reading formats, I want to give a quick explanation of what accessible literacy is, and why it matters.

So accessible literacy really just refers to being able to read in whatever format meets your needs. So in whatever format is most accessible to you. And why does it matter?

Well, on a very basic level, it matters because everyone should have that option to read as independently as possible if they choose to do so. It also matters that people are aware of what accessible formats there are available, and to know when to suggest which ones for which types of needs. This is certainly true for teachers and other educators and library staff, but it's also true for parents and caregivers. So knowing how to recognize a reader's needs and then being able to recommend a format that works for those needs, goes a long way to not only supporting that reader's literacy development, but also, as Rachel said earlier, their love and enjoyment of reading.

If I can have the next slide, please.

## Accessible formats overview

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So now we're going to talk about specific accessible formats. And these are formats that are all outlined in the resource guide that Rachel mentioned towards the beginning. And in case anybody’s following along with that, I am actually doing them in the order that they appear in that guide.

Next.

## E-books

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So first up are e-books. This is the format that people are probably most familiar with, but might also be unaware of the things that you can do with an e-book. And why it can actually be more accessible than a physical print book for some readers.

So first off, an e-book refers to any book that is represented by text and/or pictures in a digital format. And you can read them on things like e-readers or a Kobo device, computers, tablets, or smartphones. And the great thing about e-books is that they are really, really customizable, which can make them accessible to people with a wide range of types of disabilities.

So most reading apps, things like Overdrive’s Libby, which you'll typically get from a public library, or the Dolphin EasyReader app, which I'm going to demonstrate in a minute, most of these types of apps will allow you to modify the text settings. So you can change the type of the font, you can change the size of the text, the margins, the line spacing, sometimes even the spacing between the letters.

You can also often adjust the color of the text itself, as well as the color of the background. And all of this can be really useful for readers with low vision, for example, who might benefit from having a larger text font, or a specific color contrast. Some readers, for example, will read with a black background and either white or yellow text. But it's also really helpful for neurodivergent and dyslexic readers.

Changing the sizing can mean that there are fewer words and more white or open space on the page. So this then becomes less visually overwhelming, and it's helpful for readers who tend to get either easily distracted or their eyes are jumping around on the page a lot because there's less text, there’s fewer lines of text on the page, so there's fewer places to jump around to, and makes it just that much easier to focus on the line of text that you are reading.

And many struggling readers, they also benefit from hearing the audio version while they're reading the print text. This can be really helpful for readers to be able to process the text. And because you're hearing the word at the same time you’re seeing it, it also helps develop pronunciation as well.

Some e-book formats, especially the DAISY text books, they actually offer a read-along version. And so what that will do is it will highlight the text as it reads it aloud. And we're just actually gonna show a quick video of this using the Dolphin EasyReader app, which is a really great free resource for struggling readers.

And before I ask Rachel to hit play on it, I just want to let folks know that we are aware that the volume is relatively low on this video. Our apologies for that. I'll reiterate that the captions are available to turn on, and a full transcript of this and the slides will be available after the fact. So apologies if it is a little bit low.

### EasyReader DAISY text demo

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**Denise on video:** This is the Dolphin EasyReader app, which can be used to read DAISY text, DAISY audio, and EPUB file books. And here in the main menu is a list of the library collections that you have access to, including the CELA Library. And when I click on the CELA library, there's an option to search or browse or go to Direct to Player Bookshelf, which is what I'll do right now.

And so this will list all of the books you currently have downloaded in your collection. And I'm going to click on “Prince Caspian” in the DAISY text format and then select “Open.” And it should default to wherever you left off within the book, but you can also use the navigation features down at the bottom of the screen.

The bottom-left corner has a table of contents, and the bottom-right has the options of how fast or slow you're going to move backwards and forwards, navigating throughout the book anywhere from 15 seconds to a whole page, or even a heading to heading.

How a DAISY text works within the app is the app will read out using a computer automated voice, it will read the audio of the text while it highlights that same text as it reads along.

**Automated voice:** One The Island. Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, and it has been told in another book called “The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe,” how they had a remarkable--

**Denise on video:** So up at the top are some other important features. The first one allows you to search throughout the entire book. The next allows you to create a bookmark. The third is a really important one that allows you to edit all of the text settings, so you can change the size of the text, but you can also change the margins, the line spacing, and the letter spacing. You can choose to change to a different font, and you can change all of the coloring. So that's the text color, the background color, and the color that's used to highlight as it reads along.

And finally, there's an option in the top right to change the audio settings. And this allows you to change the rate of speed at which the narrator reads, add in new pronunciations, and to change the voice itself. It defaults to English, but there's also options for French or Spanish if you're reading a book in that language.

### More on e-text and reading apps

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**Denise:** So that's the Dolphin EasyReader app. And then just before I move on to our next format, I want to also add that both the Libby app and the EasyReader app are both compatible with screen reader technology that's used by folks who are blind or have certain reading disabilities. And they're also compatible with both voice controls and adaptive switch controls, allowing people with certain mobility disabilities to navigate the apps and read more independently. So they can interact with their computer or their mobile device by their voice, or by using an adaptive switch, rather than having to have precise hand movements.

And I will also add that DAISY text e-books can be downloaded directly from CELA’s website. And we also have the more commonly known EPUB files. So that's the type of e-book that you would normally get from Libby. And we often have Word document files for books as well, depending on the book.

So I can have the next slide, please.

## Braille

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So next up is braille. And this format is made up of a series of raised dots that allow the reader to read by touch rather than by sight. So braille is mostly used by folks who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision. And each individual letter, number, and sometimes even combinations of letters, are made up of a combination of up to six dots, and this is called a braille cell. And the image on the top right of the screen is an example of the English braille alphabet.

Now, there's a little bit of a misconception that braille is being completely replaced by audio technology. So things like screen readers and speech-to-text apps, you know, folks are saying that, well, we've got this technology for blind readers, so why do they need to learn braille anymore? And these are important tools, but braille is too.

Learning braille is really important to help develop someone's literacy skills, things like letter recognition, composition, phonics, grammar, numeracy... And it also fosters independence, and frankly, it allows the reader to read at their own pace. So having braille reading skills can be really, really essential to a person's educational opportunities, and then, later in life, their employment opportunities as well.

Braille is available in two formats. So the print version is the one that most folks know. And this is the embossed or raised dots on a physical piece of paper. The electronic version is a little less well-known. Basically, this is a digital format that allows readers to read the text from a screen, from a web page, for example, or from a digital braille file using something called a braille display. And there's an example of a braille display in the bottom left corner of the slide.

Basically, the way this device works is it has these movable little pins that raise up and down to form braille, displaying one line of text at a time, and then changing as the reader navigates throughout the screen. So I'm going to ask Rachel to switch screens and play a quick little video of an example of a braille display in progress.

### Braille display demo

00:20:17

**Narrator:** What is a braille display?

**Debbie Gillespie:** A braille display allows people who have no vision, unable to read print letters and text the ability to read and write independently without using audio.

A braille display, such as this one, can be used in conjunction with speech as a screen reader, or on its own by a deafblind person. If you use it, the most powerful things to do with it are editing. You're able to move the cursor to wherever you want on the screen, you're able to move the braille display along the text, and in the document that you're looking at.

There are different types of braille displays, and many of them allow a person to either use a computer to make the edits or edit right using the braille display. You’re able to connect to your computer, your laptop or desktop, or an iPhone, that allows a person to read in braille what appears on the screen.

Some braille devices allow you to also enter text right from the device on the display, and it will show up on the computer screen.

**Denise:** So that's just a quick little introduction to give you a sense of how a braille display can work and really how powerful of a tool it can be for braille readers.

### Printbraille

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Lastly, I just want to mention printbraille books. So these are picture books that have had see-through braille sheets added between the pages, so that the text has all been translated into braille. And because they're picture books, they do tend to have simple text, which makes them really great certainly for children in general, but for any beginning braille reader. They also allow sighted and blind readers to read together. So two children can read together, a blind parent can read to a sighted child, or a sighted parent can read to a blind child.

And you can order physical braille and printbraille books from CELA or download the electronic braille directly from our website.

If I can have the next slide, thanks.

## Audiobooks

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So let's talk about audiobooks. Using this format is sometimes called “ear reading” because you're reading by hearing with your ears rather than by sight with your eyes. And audiobooks use either synthetic, computer-generated, or human narration to read out the text of a book. And some books will actually-- especially nonfiction, will incorporate descriptions of any illustrations, charts, diagrams, that kind of thing as well. And increasingly, many audiobooks, particularly graphic novels, are starting to use multiple voice actors, and they're incorporating things like sound effects and ambient noise so that they become this really sort of sophisticated adaptation, giving you a really neat, immersive listening experience.

And like e-books, they are customizable, so the reader can change the narration speed, of how fast or slow the audio plays, they can replay sections, they can add bookmarks, and they can navigate throughout the book at designated sections. Sometimes you can actually even choose an entirely different voice. We saw that a little bit in the Dolphin EasyReader example. And that is usually only true for synthetic audio, but in those cases, you do sometimes have that option.

The image on the right side of the screen here is, again, another image of the audio settings in the Dolphin EasyReader app, listing some of those different customization features. Now, audiobooks are a really important accessibility tool, for several different types of disabilities. Certainly readers who are blind or have low vision, but also for some readers who are neurodivergent, have certain types of learning disabilities, dyslexia, or even a mobility disability that makes holding pages, turning a book, or even a focusing your head and eyes to look at a page for a long period of time. Anything that can make that difficult, audio can come into play. And they also do help improve the listener’s critical listening skills, as well as things like vocabulary and pronunciation.

Now, for students who read at a lower level than their age peers, having access to audiobooks means that they have the opportunity to stay current with their school material and with popular books that their friends are reading. So they can e-read these books, they can listen to the audiobook versions of them, and then they can use simple or print books to continue to develop their print reading skills. So this way, they're still working on improving those literacy skills, but they also don't necessarily have to struggle quite so much through their history and science homework because they're not struggling to read as well as to comprehend the content of the lesson. And both human and synthetic-narrated audiobooks are available as downloads and as CDs from CELA.

Next up.

## Decodable books

00:25:48

So speaking of using simpler books to develop print reading skills, next up are decodable books. And these are beginner books, but they're often more accessible than other mainstream leveled books. And this is especially true for readers with dyslexia.

So decodable books are designed using the principles of phonics, which is the way that we teach how sounds are associated with individual letters or combinations of letters. So how the T-H makes a [pronounces “th”] sound. Decodable books specifically use words that can be sounded out, rather than encouraging readers to just kind of guess at words based on the images in the book or the context of the story.

Now, like other leveled books, they do get progressively more difficult. But instead of just using words that are kind of arbitrarily more complex, they very intentionally build on the skills developed in the previous books. So this not only helps develop the reader's print reading skills, but also in their confidence in their reading ability. They're not thrown into words that are really beyond what they're able to decode. The books are purposely designed to be quite simple. And a new book is typically only introduced after a reader can comfortably read the previous book independently.

The image on the right of the screen here shows an example of two decodable books from the publisher Pearson. The image on the top is from the very first books in the whole series. And it's only got two words per sentence, and there's quite a bit of repetition throughout the book. And then the bottom image is from much later in the series. This is set 15. And it has longer, more complex sentences and more complex, difficult-- more difficult to decode vocabulary words.

Next one, please.

## Hi-Lo books

00:28:05

So what happens when a reader develops print reading skills beyond those in a decodable book, but they're maybe still not quite ready for the same reading level as many of their age peers? This is where Hi-Lo books can come in, and they are a great resource for school-age kids and teens, as well as adults who want to read books with content that is age appropriate and interesting, but still add a lower, more accessible reading level.

So the term Hi-Lo means high interest, low reading level or low difficulty level. And these books typically feature fast-paced stories, often with lots of action and dialogue, rather than kind of lengthy descriptions. Plus, they've got complex characters and subject matter that is interesting and intended to be relevant to the reader. So they really are designed to capture your interest and keep it.

Like decodable books, Hi-Lo books specifically use simpler vocabulary that helps build on those decoding skills. They're also designed to not be an overwhelming reading experience. So their overall length is typically quite a bit shorter than an average novel. But they also typically use shorter sentences, which can allow the reader to process just one concise thought at a time, rather than having a kind of multi-part complex sentence to work their way through, and the books usually have shorter paragraphs and shorter chapters, both of which provide built-in places for a reader to take a break. And they give them that sense of accomplishment.

And the image on the right of the screen shows an example of some of these features. This is a page from a book published by Orca, who are a really great source for Canadian Hi-Lo material. And this book has lots of dialogue, it's got those short paragraphs, it's got wider-than-average line spacing and bigger margins, so much less of an overwhelming page layout. It's not just a dense wall of text that someone has to wade their way through.

Now, last thing I'll say about a Hi-Lo book is that the intention of a well-written Hi-Lo book is that it gives the reader an enjoyable reading experience at their skill level, without them feeling like they're reading books for little children, which can be really important for, you know, struggling and reluctant readers, especially around the teen ages or an adult who's developing their literacy skills and wants to feel like they're reading more than just picture books.

Next slide, please.

## Graphic novels

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So my last format is graphic novels, and this is one that isn't often discussed, or added to discussions around accessible literacy. But I think it really should be. And lots of other folks agree. Graphic novels have a lot to offer, and they can actually be a really important literacy tool for some readers.

First thing I'll say about them is that graphic novels can be just as high-quality as text-only novels. So they often kind of get dismissed as kind of low-quality writing or lazy reading, but they can have just as complex plots, compelling characters, and they actually often introduce readers to more vocabulary than they might get in a regular print-only novel. But unlike regular novels, they combine both text and a significant amount of illustration. And this also means that the text is generally in shorter segments rather than long paragraphs, and it's usually things like dialogue, sound effects, or just very brief descriptions rather than having these lengthy descriptions of the scene or the setting, the illustrations give that information, so it can make for a much less overwhelming reading experience than, again, that sort of dense wall of text you might get in a print novel.

Graphic novels can also help readers improve their visual literacy, which refers to that ability to interpret and understand images. So a big part of the reading experience is reading the illustrations. So you're trying to interpret facial expressions, body language, you're following the action sequences, you're picking up on the mood and the atmosphere. All of these are things that are typically only conveyed in the illustrations, not in the text, which is also helpful to provide context for readers, to help them better understand that text.

And on the right side of the screen is an example of a graphic novel for beginner-- lower-level readers, beginner-level readers, that has some particularly good accessibility features. This is from the Pizza and Taco series by Stephen Shaskan. Hopefully I'm pronouncing that correctly. And so the layout of this is great. There are short sentences, we don't have lots of text all at once. The illustrations are quite simple, but still really effective. There isn't a lot of background clutter or extra details that can be sort of distracting or overwhelming. And the text itself, this is a particularly important feature, and you don't see this in all graphic novels, is the text is typed rather than handwritten, which means that the shape and sizing of the text can stay consistent throughout, and it doesn't use all capital letters, which is another thing you sometimes see in graphic novels, but can be a barrier for some readers with things like dyslexia or low vision.

So it is important to note that like all of the formats that I’ve mentioned, graphic novels are not universally accessible. They certainly can be difficult for readers who are blind or have low vision, but also for readers who might become easily distracted or are easily overwhelmed by a lot of visual stimulation. Some graphic novels have a lot going on on a single page. But fortunately, more and more graphic novels are now being adapted into audio versions. And I mentioned these a little bit when I was talking about audiobooks. These are the ones that tend to have multiple voice actors and lots of ambient sound effects. So they make for not only a really interesting and immersive reading experience, but a more accessible reading experience for some readers.

And I will turn it back over to Rachel.

**Rachel:** Thank you, Denise.

## Reading is more than novels

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So in addition to all that information that Denise gave us about the different formats, there are other ways to practice reading, and they might be very obvious to us, but we don't really think of them as reading. And certainly, as Denise said, having sources of text that aren’t whole books or long paragraphs can also help and encourage someone to read. And that's especially true if someone is a reluctant or a struggling reader. They'll be more tempted to read if the content is of interest to them.

So, in fact, all of us, really, might be reading more than we think because text is actually part of our daily lives. So that could include reading subtitles or captions. Maybe you're reading the captions during this webinar. Certainly texts on our phone, narratives in video games, or even reading simple instructions, road signs, even, possibly, if they have text, travel directions... So all these bits of text, essentially, that we live with every day.

It can also be helpful to have books with shorter texts, like poetry or joke books, or even cookbooks around, so that there are a variety of materials on hand.

## Design and layout matter

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So if you're looking for reading materials for someone, you may wish to consider some design and layout elements that can make the reading experience easier. And in the document, this page really refers to anyone who maybe does story times, just thinking of ways to pick books that might be more accessible for your audience. But all these rules can apply, really, in any situation. So, in general, you'd want to pick a book that is written in a clear font style and that's not too curvy or even too small. And it also really helps if the images and the texts are not overlapped in any way so that the words or the pictures become obscured.

So when it comes to choosing novels or short stories, it can be easiest to read books with wider margins, slightly wider spaces between the lines, because when text is too cluttered, obviously, it can be difficult to distinguish where the next line begins, for example, and also the appearance of just this big block of text can be overwhelming and also could turn someone into a reluctant reader because they just-- It's difficult for them to try and they don't want to do it.

For low-vision users, especially those using a screen magnification software, it's helpful to have the text left-aligned on the page. You'll see lots of places where it might be center-aligned or on the computer, where it's center aligned or on your phone, but it's much better to be left-aligned. Otherwise, if you're using a screen magnification program, you actually can get lost on the page if you have to increase the letter size to a very large size.

And then, on a last note, finding books with shorter sentence structure and lots of white space can be more appealing and certainly easier to read. So I'm just going to show you some very quick examples.

### Book design and layout examples

00:38:49

So this is a book that has a clear layout. So it uses sans serif font. So that means there are no little tails on the letters that could be difficult to distinguish, and the text size is large enough so you can read it clearly. There's also ample whitespace around the text and the images, and the background color has enough contrast in relation to the text and the images, so that all the components on the page are distinguishable.

So I think we've developed a bit of a theme here and a bit of repetition. Really, what everyone's looking for is that clear text. So everything can be read clearly, essentially. Or you might need to use an aid like CCTV to enlarge the text. But regardless, everything should be clear on the page.

So, in contrast, this is not a good example of a book. So this one has far too much clutter on it. So the text is small, and it's written in a color that's difficult to distinguish from the background page-- from the background color, sorry.

The images are also really busy on it. And so it might make it difficult for the reader to focus on the text and the images relating to the story. There are lots of books like this, so it's better to find ones that are much clearer.

## How you can help!

00:40:17

Okay, so we're coming to the end. I know there are lots of questions to come up, but I just wanted to end to say that, we've given you lots of information today, and we really hope that you leave understanding the benefits and advantages of using accessible formats for different readers. So we'd like to support you by giving you some tips that you can take back with you and support the readers in your lives.

So to start, it's really helpful to ask how as well as what someone-- someone would like to read. So we jump very quickly to, “What book do you want?” But we never ask, “Well, what format do you want it in? What would you prefer to read it in?” So just a bit of food for thought there. Also, when you do this, it drives the message that reading is acceptable in any format. And then to try and encourage and inspire reading offer a choice of different genres, different types of content or topics, and different writing styles.

And then, next, if you are a librarian or work in a school library, for example, you can help equalize all reading formats by including both print and non-print versions in your displays or when you're talking with books-- talking about books and featuring books, maybe during your story time, for example, or in a classroom.

And then, lastly, we really hope you're going to spread the word about the importance of using accessible formats and different reading formats, which is really a great way to help encourage reading and develop an enjoyment and love of reading as well.