



Allies in Reading

By Lourdes Cordero

Book production is a team effort. Everyone on the team must work to lighten the burden on the readers.

For a few seconds, I fought with two feelings. Part of me wanted to leave and the other wanted to stay, pick up the book, and get more details. I finally picked up the book and leafed through the pages for a few seconds. I spent more time putting it back into place than I had in picking it up.

Though many years have passed since that experience, I can still recall the feeling of rejection—almost repulsion—that I felt. A few days later I returned and bought the book. [I was interested in the topic,] but I must confess that until today I have not managed to overcome my distaste for that book.

This incident makes me think in the important role that we publishers have in making our titles accessible to our readers. We know that book production is a team effort. Well then, I think everyone on the team must work to lighten the burden on the readers. Consider the players, described below.

Writers' contributions in reading

The author is an important agent in the publishing team. Their participation is vital. Some suggestions:

- A principle that writers must regularly remember is that they write to people from diverse socio-cultural

contexts, even when they live in the same geographical area.

- A temptation that writers must avoid is to write merely to please themselves. A writer, like all who work in the world of publishing, must acknowledge that the position of privilege is that of readers, as we publish to communicate with them.
- Writers must develop a friendly writing style. What do I mean? That their style should so charm readers that they want to keep reading. Literary or theological tricks often make reading inaccessible.
- Simplicity and clarity must be writers' distinctive hallmark. I suggest that you choose brief and clear sentences rather than long and complex ones; that you illuminate concepts and ideas with examples and anecdotes; that you keep your sentence structures simple.

An ever growing sector of our readers are intimately linked to technology, particularly the Internet. I dare to affirm that this relationship has an influence upon, and even shapes, their preferences in reading. For example, texts on the Internet—not all, but most—are brief, concise and have an attractive format.

Perhaps some authors affirm that their specialty, for example, is theological, and that the changes in society or reading preferences do not affect them, because they

write for a public that is accustomed to the kinds of texts they produce. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is not about the content of the text, nor that it is for a specialized audience. Rather, it is that our readers experience the influence of the Internet.

It goes without saying that theological texts are works that require study and research; that is a well-known characteristic of these types of materials. We publishers are not asking authors to make their research less rigorous, but rather than to be sensitive in the way that they communicate their learning. For example, scholarly rigor is not a synonym for interminable sentences. I also do not believe that we need to “bury” readers beneath a mountain of bibliographical citations, or obligate him or her to have a theological dictionary on hand due to the excessive use of complicated terms. Now, if the text requires them, we can place the citations and clarifications in a different section, at the end of the chapter or book.

In short, I encourage writers to give greater study to the sociocultural context of readers, and also to update their studies regarding the ways people learn.

Editors’ contributions in reading

As part of the publishing team, editors can also become readers’ allies.

In this article I do not intend to explain the work of the editor in the publishing process—that is another topic. What I do want to emphasize is that one of the important tasks of the editor is simplifying the content for readers. Now, in no way is “simplifying” synonymous with impoverishing the content of the text. I recall three important tasks that an editor must perform:

- Verify that the text has coherence. Here I refer not just to the relationship between sentences and paragraphs, but also to the unity of

the entire work, and even, depending on publishing house’s policies, that the work is consistent with its editorial stance.

- Avoid redundancy of ideas or words. Sometimes this is a critical point between authors and editors. Writers are not always satisfied when a page is cut in half to eliminate excessive repetition.
- Stimulate interaction with readers. Often we in publishing complain about the low level of literacy in society or the church. A tiny contribution that we as editors can make [to change this], together with authors, is to stimulate understanding and reflection among our readers. To accomplish this, we could include brief summaries at the end of each chapter, add a few questions to stimulate readers’ thinking, include tables or charts to clarify the content, emphasize key ideas with bold or larger type or by highlighting them as pull-quotes.

I recall a reader once told me, “I would like to find a book with a map that would keep me from getting lost.” This young man sought a book with tables, summaries, and other tools to help him retain and remind him afresh of what [he gained through] his first reading.

Designers’ contributions in reading

A book’s design also contributes to making reading difficult or easy. The design department, or the person in charge of this task in publishing, must remember such elements as:

- Choosing the appropriate typography. The size of the type, the font and the space between the letters are important when the time comes to read. In my

- country, the first thing many people do when buying a Bible is to open it and see the size of the font. Why? They still have the prejudice that Bibles must have small lettering, so what they seek is to determine, among the Bibles with small lettering, which is the largest [the most readable].
- Avoid rigidity in layouts. What do I mean with this? Sometimes I have encountered books whose interior design looks more like a collection of bricks than text. The paragraphs are too long, they have narrow margins, and sometimes, to this is added the negative impression that they either have the defect of too little ink on the paper or too much, so that the page is soaked with it. These details do not invite reading.
 - Trust in technology, but do not be enslaved to it. There are now many [software] packages that help us in the task of design. This is good and we are grateful for such advances. The danger is that sometimes we trust it to perform some tasks requiring our judgment. In some books, at times, I find that the space between the letters or the lines is too wide, while that in other lines it is just fine. I think that in these cases the designer relied on automatic justification [of the text.] While this makes the task of pouring the text easier, it is not a guarantee that the work will be done well, nor does it exempt us from our vigilance toward an excellent product.
 - Include a few visual communication elements. I think

- it is not a case of juxtaposing e-books versus classic or paper books. It is true that we cannot compete, for example, with the use of color in electronic texts, due to the high cost this would incur, but we can include other elements such as wider line spacing and more ample margins, not just for aesthetics but also in consideration of the reader. Illustrations can also be included, as long as they are relevant.
- Design an attractive cover. For some readers, the first obstacle they must overcome is the book cover. If it does not capture their attention, the book will remain on the shelf or counter. It is not enough to have an attractive cover, either: it must communicate a specific message to the reader. We must not forget that, however insignificant the work, we must care about its quality, the material used and its elaboration. The cover should be laminated or coated to insure its durability.

Paragraphs in electronic texts are usually only three or four lines in length, with ample spacing and a font that is bigger than Times New Roman 12 points. What kind of impact does this format have on our reading? It avoids our being glued to the screen, permits us to read easily, and even gives us the feeling that we have increased our speed in reading. Having a finger on the cursor moving down the screen quickly as we read I think sometimes gives us the feeling that we are becoming better readers.

A few days ago a friend commented that when she finds a book with large type, wide spacing between the lines, short paragraphs and broad margins, that book invites her to

read. In fact, being able to turn its pages more quickly than in other books creates in her a feeling of satisfaction and affirms her self-esteem as a good reader. She likes to read books with these characteristics, for they help her meet and surpass her goals in reading.

Final thoughts

What caused my rejection toward the book I mentioned in my introduction? As I wrote this article I recalled some details. The first image that came to mind was the cover of the book. It was a dark brown matte color. The title was pale yellow and almost disappeared into the brown background. The book looked discolored, old. I think the reason for this was that the cover was not laminated and lacked any type of coating. The size of the book was 151x17 centimeters, known also as a pocket-size book. It is a popular size because it is easy to carry. What seemed intolerable to me was its typography. The font size was very small, but also the space between the lines was too narrow, and it was easy to go to different line by mistake. With regard to the margins, I think they were not wider than a centimeter and a half on either side. This fact meant you had to juggle the book to try to read the

first words on the side bound to the spine of the book.

I also remember the heavy, blocky paragraphs. It seemed they were all the same size. The look was monotonous. And the content? Sadly, I remember none of it, and that is not due to my faulty memory or my prejudices. As I wrote this article I looked for the book to give myself another chance to read it, but I did not find it. Perhaps it got buried in some drawer. Maybe I even gave it away.

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