

Quality text editing

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Abstract – *Text editing is more than the knowledge of word processing techniques. Originally typographers, printers, text editors were the ones qualified to edit texts, which were well structured, legible, easily understandable, clear, and were able to emphasize the core of the text. Time has changed, and nowadays everyone has access to computers as well as to text editing software and most users believe that having these tools is enough to edit texts. However, text editing requires more skills. Texts appearing either in printed or in electronic form reveal that most of the users do not realize that they are not qualified to edit and publish their works. Analyzing the ‘text-products’ of the last decade a tendency can clearly be drawn. More and more documents appear, which instead of emphasizing the subject matter, are lost in the maze of unstructured text slices. Without further thoughts different font types, colors, sizes, strange arrangements of objects, etc. are applied. We present examples with the most common typographic and text editing errors. Our aim is to call the attention to these mistakes and persuade users to spend time to educate themselves in text editing. They have to realize that a well-structured text is able to strengthen the effect on the reader, thus the original message will reach the target group.*

Keywords: *school documents, typography, word processing*

I. INTRODUCTION

Who are or who are not qualified to edit texts?

The question can be asked in a rather straightforward way: who should or who should not be allowed to edit texts? The first answer which comes to our mind is that of course everyone. If we think, however, a little further we have to realize that the answer is not that simple. Those are considered qualified who have at least basic knowledge of word processing and typography. Until the word processor users, web designers, slide-show creators, etc. are not familiar with these basic skills they are not qualified to edit and publish – to make the document freely accessible – their works.

From Gutenberg to the era of PCs to create documents, mainly in printed form, was the privilege of those who worked in the printing field. By now, however, most of the computer users think that they are qualified to edit texts just because they have access to a word processor. The problem, however, is a lot more complicated. To be able to produce a text with any of the word processors first the user has to be familiar with the different kinds of techniques of creating and saving the text. Among the text-creating techniques typing is the most commonly applied method. Beyond being able to type or keyboard the text the user have to be familiar with the grammar of the language also. In an electronic document (e-document) – created by using a computer – either made for print or screen the syntactic errors are usually marked unlike those in a handwritten document. Last in the list but not less important than the other two skills, the user of a word processor also have to be familiar with at least the basic rules of typography ([1], [2], [3], [8], [9], [10], [11]).

In the everyday usage typography has an extremely important role, though usually remains invisible – until the reader does not stumble into a huge typographic mistake –, which is somehow understandable ([9]). The role of typography is unquestionable, since the appearance of the text has a great influence on the reader. To be aware of these facts would mean that word processor users have nothing else to do than spend some time to get familiar with the basic typographic rules before they start working on the software and before they hand out their products.

The pattern, however, seems not this simple, because texts appearing either in printed or in electronic form reveal that most of the users do not realize that they are not qualified to edit and publish their works. We have analyzed the ‘text-products’ of the last decade and have been able to draw a clear tendency. Unfortunately, the proportion of documents in which the subject matter is correctly emphasized is decreasing since most are lost in the maze of unstructured text slices. The editors of these documents do not realize that the more they try to ‘decorate’ their texts the less they gain by it.

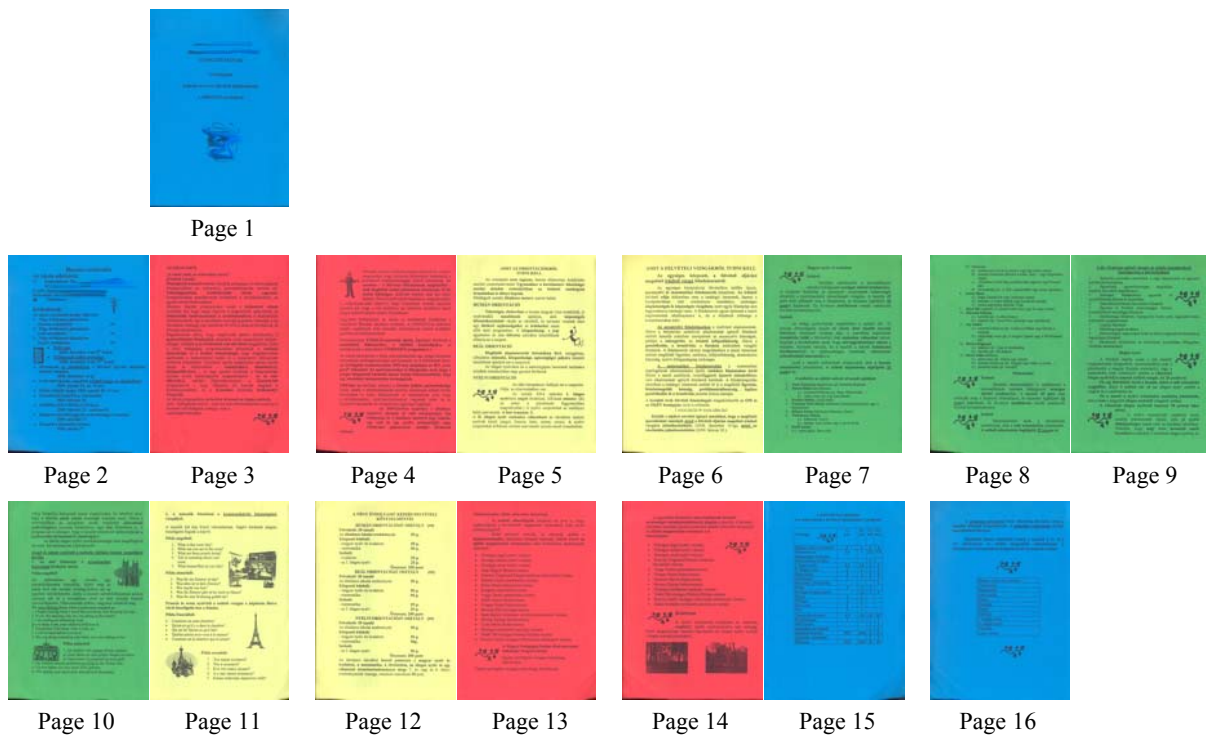


Fig. 1. The consecutive pages of the sixteen-page long leaflet

II. THE DOCUMENT IN STUDY

For this article we picked a document, which is the plan of schooling of a secondary grammar school. The document was unfortunately copied in a couple of hundred copies, and was handed out to senior elementary school students who were planning to continue their study in this school.

The choice fell on this document because school administration and teachers – in other schools also –, who should provide good examples, who should teach students how to create typographically correct documents, usually ignore typographic rules. Our aim is to call the attention to these documents by sampling the mistakes which appear in the selected document. Hoping that by grouping these mistakes they are more emphasized and really call the attention to this so often ignored subject.

We will present examples which ignore some or in cases most of the basic typographic rules. We do this to call attention to these mistakes and in hope that this collection makes word processor users think further and avoid the listed mistakes.

To get the feeling of the document all the pages of the leaflet are depicted in Fig. 1, while in the other figures (Figure 2–8) enlarged details are shown.

A. Colors and pictures

On one hand, the color-combination of the document seems quite unusual, while on the other hand the func-

tion(s) of the colors is also questionable. The document was designed on white paper with black characters, and later on was copied on these colorful papers – red, yellow, dark blue and green. Among the four colors the yellow seems to be the best choice, because the text is readable on these pages. The blue and green are darker, so the readability of the text is worse than it is on the yellow, but by straining the eye we can work out the text. The red papers are the worst. They are the hardest to read the text on, and in addition to this, this harsh red irritates the eye. The document was designed to inform and call attention, but using such colors has the opposite affect on the reader. We always have to keep in mind that color is not to save a bad design as we can see in this document.

Taking a closer look of these pages other typographic mistakes can be revealed. The main problem is the inconsistency of the typographic work. It would be easier to accept these colors if they carried any information, but they do not, they are just to create something unusual, cheerful.

The other quite unusual technique applied in this document is the usage of functionally useless ClipArt figures. Besides the informative pictures of the document (Fig. 2f–2j) these ClipArt figures appear randomly together with the almost unrecognizable pictures of the school (Fig. 2k–2l). The subject matter does not require any of these ClipArt objects. The ‘leaves’ (Fig. 2e) are inserted everywhere (fifteen times), where vacancy was detected, without any reason (Fig. 1). The ‘helpless

figure' on page 4 (Fig. 1, Page 4 and Fig. 2c) is rather controversial, since the text next to it speaks about the school's plan on creating language groups. The figure suggests that the school does not have any idea about grouping the students. The 'happy dancing figure' on page 5 (Fig. 1, Page 5 and Fig. 2d) just does not have anything to do with the students who are planning to study arts, law, or economics.

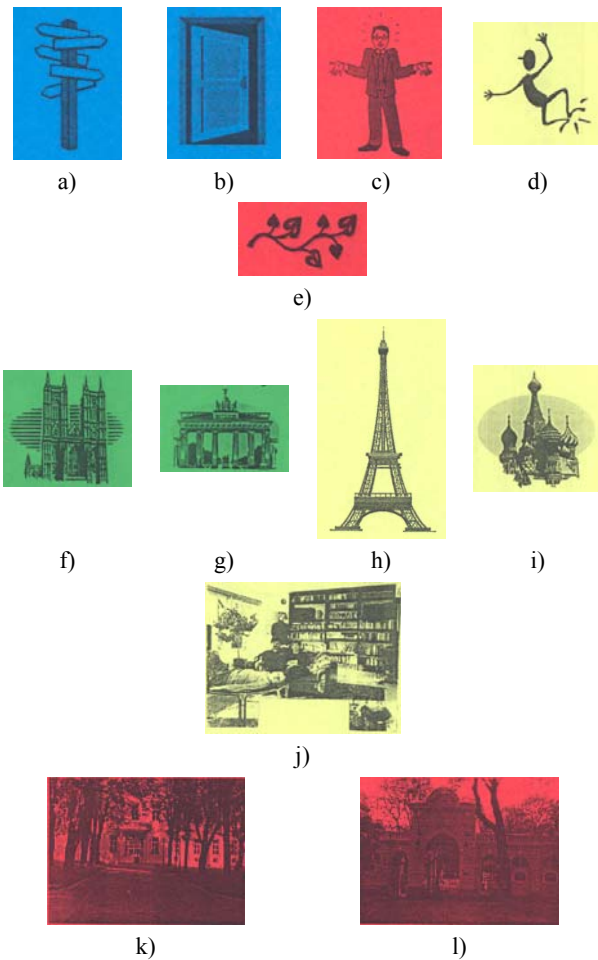


Fig. 2. Pictures of the selected document in the order of appearance. The ClipArt figure 'leaves' (e) appears fifteen times in the document

B. Paragraph formats

It is well accepted that indentation provides the reader with an easily accessible entry point to the paragraph. The length of the indent with such short lines is usually one em (quad) indent. Traditionally, all of the paragraphs are indented, except at the first paragraph, following a heading, where the editor has the right to decide whether to indent it or not ([1], [2], [11]). Considering all these, it can be seen that in the selected text four different first-line indentations appear in a completely chaotic way, which are represented in Fig. 1 and enlarged in Fig. 3.

The alignment of the text is mainly justified, except on page 4 (Fig. 1, Page 8). Those who apply justified alignment, however, have to be aware that justification takes its toll, and spaces between words will significantly differ. It has been proved that equally distributed spaces between words are one of the most important elements in the readability of a text ([9]). One of the techniques to even the sizes of the white spaces is the usage of hyphenation. In this document, however, neither this nor any other technique is used to equalize the white spaces between the words, so huge spaces appear quite frequently in the document.

Similarly to first-line indentation, the enumerated and bulleted lists of paragraphs are rather arbitrary (Fig. 4). The position of the number or character, the beginning of the first line of the paragraph, and the beginning of the consecutive line(s) of the paragraphs are selected in several different ways, the content of the paragraphs give no reason for this wide range of variety. The enlarged picture in Fig. 4c (further enlarged in Fig. 4d) shows that, instead of using enumerated list, manual numbering is used. In Fig. 4e (further enlarged in Fig. 4f) a commonly encountered mistake is shown, i.e., the numbers below each other are not aligned by their value position.

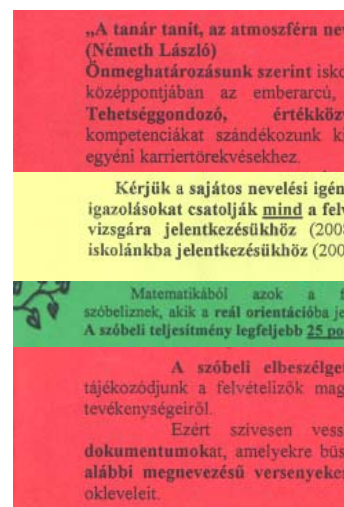


Fig. 3. The different first-line indentations applied in the document

The headings, subheadings of the text should appear in a descending value of "attracting attention" ([11]), which means that the headings on different levels should appear in a hierarchical order. In the selected document the headings lost their original functions by using an inconsistent system for their layout. There is no difference between the layouts of the different levels, quite the contrary, there are differences between the appearances of headings on the same level (Fig. 1 and Fig. 5). For the first-level headings five various styles were found.

They differ from each other in size, in style – capitals or not –, in the indents of the paragraphs, and in their positions. Similarly to the first-level headings, there is inconsistency on the second and third level also. The size of the second-level headings equals to one of the first-level headings (Fig. 5e and Fig. 6).

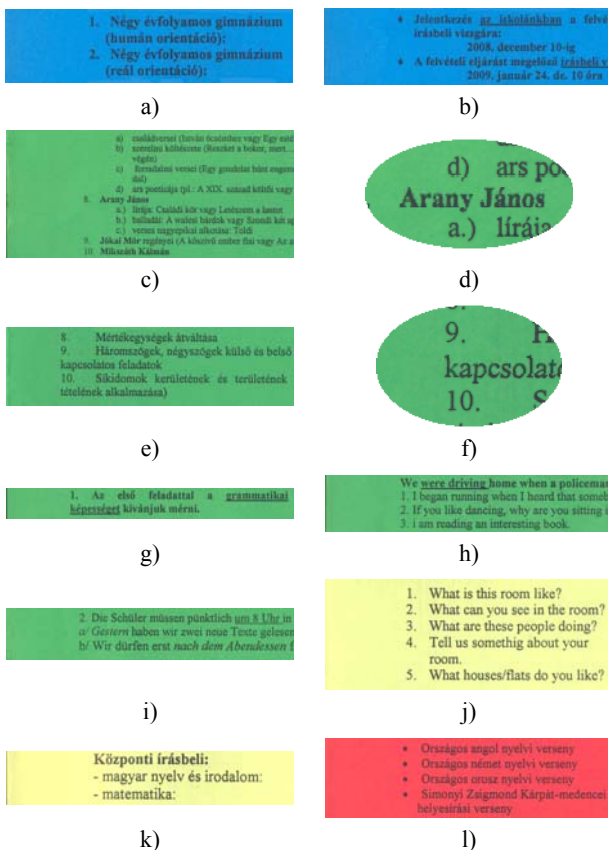


Fig. 4. A selection from the various enumerated and bulleted lists found in the document. d) and f) are the enlarged versions of c) and e) to demonstrate the problem more clearly.

C. Character formats

Fortunately, only one typeface is used through the document. On the other hand, the font size changes arbitrary throughout the document (for examples see Fig. 4a, 4c, Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). The enlarged details of Fig. 2–6 illustrate that the tools to emphasize subject matter (bold, italic, underline, capital) are lost in the overuse of them. Some people tend to believe more is better but nothing looks as amateur as a page full of different typefaces and styles.

What captures the eye first is the intensive usage of underlining, which is not a suggested technique to emphasize subject matter. Typographers are against underlining because the lines cut through the letters at the baseline, making the characters more hardly recognizable and readable.

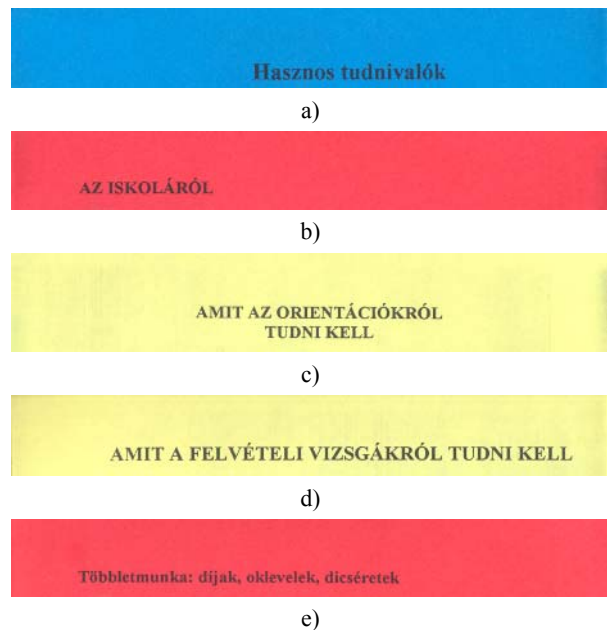


Fig. 5. First-level headings of the document

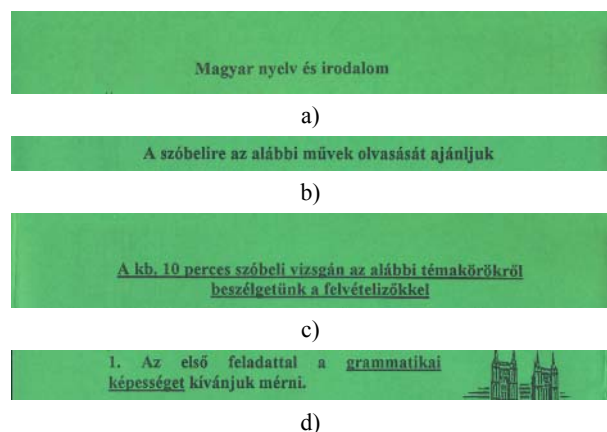


Fig. 6. Second- and third-level headings. Sample a) is a second-level heading, while the others from b)–d) are third-level headings.

Another typical mistake is that a huge amount of text uses the bold type style. It is again true that the more is not better. On page 2, for example, (Fig. 1, Page 2) the whole text, while on page 15 all the numbers in the table are in bold, which means that we have lost the essence of emphasizing. If the whole page is in bold, nothing is emphasized. On the consecutive pages whole paragraphs, or 5–6 lines can be found in bold, which is again too much.

Beyond the fact that these techniques are used more than they are needed, the chaotic way in which they are applied is also notable.

- In Fig. 7a only the word, while in 7b the word along with the consecutive white space is underlined.

- In Fig. 7j (see line 1, 3 and 8) the colon is either underlined or not.
- To emphasize the ‘points’ (the unit of measure in the exam) several different techniques are used:
 - both the number and unit are in bold (Fig. 7d and 7e),
 - both the number and the unit are underlined, but not the suffix of the unit (Fig. 7c and 7e),
 - the number is in bold, the unit is in normal style (Fig. 7i).
- The exclamation mark and the first word of the consecutive sentence are in bold (Fig. 7f).
- The first article of the sentence is in bold (Fig. 7g).
- The suffixes are usually left in normal style (Fig. 7c, 7e, 7h), but not in Fig. 4b, 4d, and 6d.
- A whole title is underlined (Fig. 6c).
- The list items in the bulleted list on Page 2 (Fig. 1, Fig. 7j and 7k) – where the whole text is in bold – is underlined in a totally inconsistent way:
 - two of the list items are underlined from the beginning to the end,
 - in two other list items only expressions are underlined,
 - while in the other items nothing is underlined,
 - in the seventh item the characters are in capital.

Consequently, we can say that both underlining and bold are used in a totally inconsistent way in this document.

D. Syntactic mistakes

A number of syntactic mistakes are also present in the document including sentences that do not start with a capital letter (see e.g. Fig. 4h, line 4). One of the most common mistakes is, however, that the en-dash character is substituted by the hyphen character. The other frequent mistake is the absence of the non-breaking space. This special character is often substituted by a normal space character or there is no space character at all. Several of the already mentioned examples also carry these mistakes. In Fig. 4k the hyphen character is used for the character of the bulleted list. In Fig. 8c for both for the hyphen and the en-dash characters the hyphen character is used. In addition to the wrong character, the wide white space following the opening en-dash implies that normal space character is used instead of the non-breaking space. In Fig. 7k the hyphen character is used two initiate a period of time, instead of the en-dash character.

One of the classical source of mistakes is the wrong usage of numbers and the consecutive unit of measures. The selected document is not free of this type of mistake either. Between the number and the unit of measure a non-breaking space character should be used. Using the

non-breaking space solves the problem of breaking the line and widening the space between the number and unit of measure when justify alignment is applied. For example on Fig. 7e there is a line break between the number and the unit of measure. In Fig. 8a three different combinations of number and unit of measure can be seen in the same column.



Fig. 7. Strange and wrong character formattings to emphasize subject matter

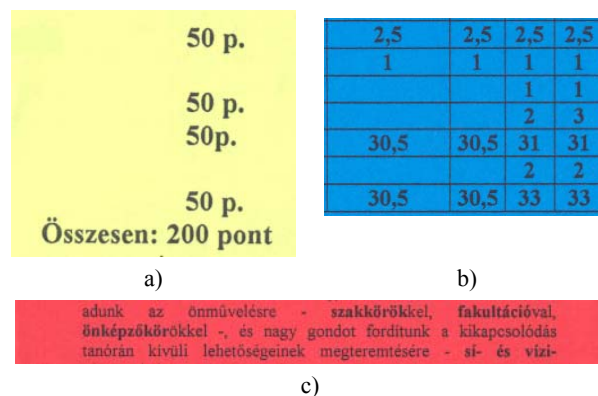


Fig. 8. Using numbers and units of measure, and examples for the inconsistent usage of the hyphen and en-dash characters

Another typical mistake, which is on the boundary of typography and grammar, is the alignment of the numbers. In Fig. 8b the alignment of the numbers is centered, so it is hard to distinguish between the order of the magnitude of the numbers.

E. Miscellaneous mistakes

Increasing and/or decreasing the column-width of a table – especially containing numbers –, without any reason, is also a source of the confusion. It is commonly experienced that users do not pay attention to this fact, and let the word processor change the columns arbitrary, as it can be seen in Fig. 8b.

Another source of inconsistency in this document is the usage of time. For the beginning of events two different methods are applied:

- the hour is given by number, followed by the word type ‘óra’,
- the hour is given by number, followed by the minutes in superscript style, followed by the word type ‘órától’.

III. CONCLUSIONS

To learn the basic typographic rules several valuable books and handouts are available both in printed ([1], [2], [3], [8], [9], [10], [11]) and in electronic forms (for a collection of electronic typographic sources see [7]). For the Hungarian readers we suggest some well known works of famous typographers, as Tibor Szántó, György Haiman, Irén Bardóczy and Péter Virágvölgyi. The latest is well known for his book published in recent years on typography for ‘common’ computer users, which is unique and long-needed in this field. In English we mentioned above three typographic books from the following authors: Gavin Ambrose and Paul Harris ([1]), David Jury ([8], [9]) and a book about graphic design by Alice Twemlow ([10]) (books from the latter two authors are also available in Hungarian).

We are in desperate need of these books and handouts. Nothing can demonstrate this need better than a copied and widely spread document full of typographic errors. We have chosen a school handout to illustrate the most commonly encountered typographic mistakes. Our goal is to call the attention to these mistakes and emphasize David Jury’s words from one of his famous typographic book ([8]): ‘Rules can be broken, but never ignored’. By ignoring the rules the focuses can be lost,

the document will not be able to emphasize the subject matter, and will be illegible, unreadable, and unaesthetic. Poor typography can mutilate a beautifully written piece. On the other hand, excellent typography promotes the writing, and by doing so it can attract and retain the reader and convey the spirit of the words.

The aim of this paper is to highlight that ‘common’ computer users are not familiar with these basic typographic rules. We are convinced that it is the schools’ responsibility to teach and set good examples to the next generations in word processing and to respect typography. In the information-communication era, where everyone has access to computers, everyone must edit texts and it is their responsibility to do it correctly. This can only be done if they are familiar with the basic rules of the visual communication, such as the basics of typography.

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