

If it's Hard to Read, it's Hard to Do: Study Shows Difficult to Read Instructions Decrease Motivation

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It is not surprising that people are more willing to participate in a task if it does not require too much effort. What is interesting, however, is the way we determine just how easy a task will be and therefore, how motivated we are to complete it. New research from University of Michigan psychologists Hyunjin Song and Norbert Schwarz investigates how thinking about a task (i.e., how complex or simple it will be) affects our attitude toward the task itself.

The researchers tested this by trying to motivate a group of college students to exercise regularly by providing them with directions on how to implement an exercise regimen. Half of the students received the directions written in standard, easy-to-read Arial font. The remaining students received the directions typed in Brush font (which looks like it has been written with a paintbrush and is difficult to read). The students were then asked to estimate how long the exercise routine would take and if they would make it part of their daily routine. In the second experiment, students were provided with a recipe detailing how to prepare sushi. As before, half of the group received an easy to read recipe while the remaining students received a recipe typed in a difficult to read font and all of the students were asked how difficult they thought it would be to make the sushi.

The results, reported in the October issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, are intriguing. The students who received the exercise instructions written in the easy to read, Arial font, believed that the workout regimen would take less time and feel easier compared to the students who received the directions in the harder to read font. More importantly, when the instructions were written in an easy to read font, the students were more willing to make exercise a part of their daily routine. The results of the second experiment were similar. Again, the students who read the recipe in an easy to read font determined it would take a shorter time to prepare and not require a lot of culinary skill to complete. In addition, the students who received the easy to read recipe were more willing to attempt the recipe than the group who had the difficult to read directions.

Overall, these results show that people equate the ease of reading and processing directions with how complex the task itself will be. In other words, if the directions are difficult (or in this case, presented in a difficult-to-read style), the task will be viewed as being difficult, taking a long time to complete and perhaps, not even worth trying.