

Reading Well on a Small Screen

A short field note on formatting documents for phones, written while building a viewer that has to open whatever it is handed.

The measure matters more than the font

A line of text that runs the full width of a tablet is tiring to read. The eye loses its place on the return sweep, and long lines make even a well-set typeface feel dense. Capping the column at roughly forty characters of width solves more than any font choice can.

The cap has to know when to get out of the way. A phone held sideways is short and wide; a tablet held sideways is neither. Keying the rule to viewport height rather than width separates the two cleanly, which is why the same document looks right on both without a device check.

Formats carry meaning differently

A Word document keeps its structure in paragraph styles, so a converter that understands styles reproduces the outline faithfully. A spreadsheet often keeps meaning in cell colour, and a converter that drops colour drops the meaning with it.

The same loss is trivial in one format and serious in the other. That asymmetry is not obvious until a real document is opened, which is a good argument for opening one early.

What a viewer owes the reader

It may show less than the original application. It must never show something different. A number that reads as positive because the minus sign lived in a colour is not a cosmetic loss — it is a wrong answer, and a viewer that produces wrong answers is worse than no viewer at all.

Placeholders and patience

Files in the cloud are not always on the device. Asking for one politely, and waiting while the provider fetches it, is the difference between a document that opens and an error that looks like corruption.

Most of the work in a file viewer turns out to be about getting the bytes, not about drawing them.