Understanding design features of aphasia-friendly written material:
What matters most to people with aphasia?

The goal of this project was to understand design elements that lead to increased comprehension of written information and to co-construct aphasia-friendly written material relevant to our community. To achieve this goal, focus groups each consisting of three people with aphasia were formed. The participants were recruited from the Aphasia Conversation Lab at Lamar University. To be able to take part in this research project, participants had to be independent and live active lifestyles. In addition, they had to have high levels of comprehension and be able to verbalize opinions and experiences with support. People with cognitive-communicative diagnoses such as dementia were excluded. Each focus group session was recorded and analyzed. Four sessions were fully transcribed. There were a total of eleven sessions that ranged from 19 minutes to 42 minutes. The total number of minutes was 326 minutes and 38 seconds.

During the initial focus group, an open discussion was held with the participants to gather insight regarding the types of written information most important to them and to evaluate different design features that make material less difficult to read. Based on these discussions, a wide variety of materials was narrowed down to three types. These types were political information, information related to health care and restaurant menus. Each weekly session was focused on one of these materials. Design features analyzed were font size, white space, sentence length and word choice. The research process was collaborative. The participants’ opinions guided the manipulation of the text and layout of these written materials to make them more aphasia-friendly. An aspect critical for this research is that the participants were active and their feedback and opinions were essential for the creation of the aphasia-friendly written material. The potential impact this type of study could have on the lives of people with aphasia can be summed up by one of the participants, “We wouldn't have to um be depend on other folks. We could you know go in and make our order.”

The results from this study show that the importance of particular design aspects (e.g., font size, white space) varies according to the type of material. For example, bigger font size is always necessary for materials like wordy healthcare documents, but is less important for materials like menus. Another finding from this study is that the use of bullets is almost always beneficial. The end goal of this study is to be able to distribute the final products (e.g. menus, health related forms) to people with aphasia and gain information on the usability of the products.