

Reading Pen

What is it?

Many people with reading difficulties use a combination of a talking word processor and an electronic version of a text, allowing them to listen to the whole text, or to individual "difficult" words. The Reading Pen is an alternative support for people who can read the majority of a piece of text, but who have difficulties with a few words, reducing their ability to extract the meaning of a piece of text. It allows the user to scan the difficult word, hear a spoken playback of the word, and even have a dictionary definition of the word read back to them. It can be used to read single words, or lines of text, allowing a difficult word to be read in context.

Does it work?

Earlier versions of the Reading Pen were notoriously difficult to use, experiencing difficulties with photocopied text and non-standard fonts. Results were often so bad that people would just give up. Used properly, the Quicktionary II actually works very well, achieving a level of accuracy close to that of some of the best scanning programs. It is important to emphasise *proper use* - the pen should be used in a near vertical position and scanning should start about 1 cm to the left of the word - neither of which is very intuitive. The markings on the buttons used to control the Pen (On/off, ESC, ENT and four arrow) are also unhelpful.



The user will have to learn the correct button sequence for different tasks. For example, to scan and find out about a single word, press the On/off button, scan the word, listen to the word (press the RIGHT arrow for letter by letter spelling), press the DOWN arrow for the first definition, press ENT followed by the RIGHT arrow to hear the definition, press the DOWN arrow again for further definitions. To scan a line of text, switch on, scan the text and press ESC. You can then use the RIGHT arrow to move through the words, hearing each spoken out by the pen. If you want a definition of a word, press the DOWN arrow. Simple (NOT)!

The pen has other functions, for example, if a word is not recognised because of a mis-scan, it is possible to edit the text to correct it and then listen to a definition. This is very fiddly - it is actually better to just re-scan the text. It is best to stick with just using the pen to scan a single word, or a line of text.

If things go wrong, there's a temptation to try pressing different buttons - this won't harm the pen, but it is easy to end up in Inverse Mode (shown by a letter A appearing in the top right corner of the display). This is used to scan light text on a dark background and will not work for normal text! To get out of this, simply press the RIGHT arrow so that the A disappears.

The Quicktionary II worked well with a number of fonts, from basic ones such as Times, Arial
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and Comic to italic and script fonts. The Pen coped reasonably well with a poor quality fax, only failing when letters were "broken".

Who could use it?

The Pen uses the American Heritage College Dictionary, a fairly "highlevel" dictionary which copes with UK English spelling. Scanning requires a fairly steady hand, though the Pen has wheels which make it easier to scan in a straight line. It is probably most suitable for people with dyslexia in the later years of secondary schooling, or in HE/FE.

The Quicktionary Reading Pen is available from Inclusive Technology (01457 819799) (£135) and iANSYST(01223 420101), also costing £135.