

The eyes have it

Richard Lackey explains how inverting colours on your screen can help prevent tired eyes, and shares some other tips for eye health



Richard Lackey ATI has been translating from Spanish and French to English since 2011, now as Contractually Speaking, specialising in legal and finance translations. You can contact him at richard@contractually-speaking.co.uk or via Twitter, @ContractSpeak.

There's no getting around it – we translators spend many hours a day in front of a screen. Towards the end of a long day, reading the words on the screen can get harder and harder. However, there is an easy way (built into Windows and Mac OS) to give your eyes a break: inverting the screen colours. This feature, which presents white text on a black background, makes the screen easier on the eyes for people with a sensitivity to brightness, and can even make text easier to read for some people.

Before going into the technical details of inverted colours, I'd like to outline some of the benefits. First, it can be great for proofreading. We each have our own methods to help catch mistakes when proofreading a text: correcting a printout, using Word's built-in text-to-speech feature, or changing the text to double-spaced. Reading through your work in a white font on a black screen can have a similar effect, with the added advantage that you don't need to leave your CAT tool.

Have you ever translated one of those horrible PDFs that a client has haphazardly signed and scanned? In legal translation, they almost inevitably crop up from time to time. For those parts of the text that can't be reached by an OCR reader and which you're struggling to grasp, try inverting the colours. You might just find them a little easier to read.

Inverted colours can also be useful when you are working or reading in the dark or with limited lighting. Perhaps you might be working on a laptop during a long-haul flight, or checking your phone while in bed. As a dark screen emits less light, it is much easier on the eyes.

Straining to read

By the end of a long day of translation, your eyes and mind will undoubtedly tire. When you are straining to read words clearly, or your attention is beginning to wane, this is the ideal moment to invert the colours on your screen. Not only is the screen friendlier on the eyes, but I even find that the changed work environment gives me a bit of a mental boost.

There are a few potential drawbacks to inverted colours. Firstly, if you are working with images or text where the colours are important, then inverted colours probably won't be of use. Secondly, Windows Magnifier can be

Inverted colours can also be useful when you are working or reading in the dark or with limited lighting

minimised, but can't be hidden. Likewise, I am not aware of a shortcut key to activate inverted colours on a Mac. Alternatives exist, such as browser extensions or Word options, but I prefer Magnifier as it's a more universal solution.

All Windows versions from XP to Windows 10 have Magnifier. To start the function, simply hold down the Windows key and hit the plus sign. This will immediately zoom in to the location of your mouse pointer, which isn't our aim. But don't panic! Click on the Magnifier

icon and then access Settings by clicking the cog on the panel that appears. In Magnifier Options, slide the zoom scale all the way to the left so the zoom won't activate when you use the tool. Next, click 'Turn on colour inversion' and the colours will automatically be inverted. You can now click 'OK' and minimise Magnifier. To exit Magnifier, hold down the Windows key and press 'Escape'.

In Mac OS, from the Apple icon at the top of the screen, choose System Preferences > Accessibility. Under the Display section, click the 'Invert Colours' checkbox. It's just as simple on an iPhone – go to Settings > General > Accessibility. Then choose 'Invert Colours'.

Screen breaks

There are also other things you can do to protect your eyes. I would recommend making sure that your desk is not facing a window or bright light, as this places extra strain on your eyes. Furthermore, my optometrist advises taking screen breaks every 20 minutes to stop your eyes from drying out. If you don't want to get up from your desk, try gazing at an object in the distance for a few seconds. Regular breaks are also advisable from a concentration point of view.

Lastly, here's a nice end-of-day tip I learned from Gabriela Bocanete's Mangostino Yoga (www.facebook.com/MangostinoYoga). My version is an English twist on this classic Buddhist meditation technique, but I think you'll like it. Make yourself a nice mug of tea. If the mug is thick enough, you should be able to warm your hands without scalding yourself. Now, cup your hands slightly and cover both eyes. Your eyes should be closed at this point. Keep your hands there for around 30 to 45 seconds and you should feel a refreshing warmth. To finish, gradually open your eyes in the darkness before slowly peeling your hands away from your face. And – Namaste! – your tea should now be at just the right temperature to drink. 

Richard Lackey will be demonstrating this tip and more in his talk 'Tech Tools for Low-Stress Linguists' at the Mediterranean Editors and Translators Meeting (METM) in Brescia, Italy, in October 2017.