

Following the Eyes

By Nancy M. Lowe, MPT, CHT, CAE

Most people are unaware of the powerful influence that vision has on posture. Try sitting in the front row of a movie theatre. If you're like me, you'll find yourself sliding down in your seat attempting to position yourself recliner-style to face the screen towering above you. Or if you have young and supple neck joints, you might just tilt your head back and look up at the movie with no immediately dire consequences. In either case, you've adjusted your posture to your visual "target".

Angle of Vision: I have more than once passed by offices and seen workers leaning over their desks vulture-like while reading or writing. Our bodies follow our eyes. It's easier for us to focus on something if it is parallel to our faces. If your reading material is lying horizontally on your desk, you will tend to bend your upper back and neck to place your face parallel to it and view it from this preferred angle of vision. For better alignment and comfort, angle your paperwork up and toward your face and sit up straight.

Reading: A 60-degree incline is generally a good angle for reading material. However, if you have a rounded upper back your angle of vision may be inclined slightly downward compared to that of others. You may do best with your book, monitor or other visual target a bit lower. Similarly, if you wear bifocals your angle of vision is lowered when you look through the lower portion of the lenses. You may want to ask your optometrist about computer lenses if this is a problem when viewing the monitor.

Writing: A good angle for a writing surface is 10 to 20 degrees above horizontal. This is an improvement over a flat surface for positioning the neck and back and it is still low enough to allow you to write without straining your arm and wrist. A slant board or a binder placed to tilt your papers toward you can help you accomplish this.

Touch-typing: If you are a typist of the hunt-and-peck persuasion, I'd like you to seriously consider learning to touch-type. You may have considered this before, but here's a new reason. Repeatedly looking down and up from the keyboard to the computer monitor can create neck and upper back annoyances and pain.



Looking at reading materials flat on the desk can lead to uncomfortable bending of the neck and back.



For better alignment and comfort, angle your paperwork up and toward you.

Further, since the keyboard is for you a visual target, you should theoretically place it where you can see it easily: high and tilted toward you. But this would wreak havoc on your shoulders, wrists and hands, which would all be forced to work in awkward positions. A touch-typist can worry less about vision and put the keyboard where it's most comfortable for the arms.

Focus distance: If your visual target is too close or too far away, you will adjust your body position to see more clearly. Leaning forward to look at your computer monitor may indicate that you need to move the monitor closer. Sitting with your chair scooted back while reaching out to the keyboard may mean the monitor is too close. For most people the ideal focus distance is somewhere between 15 and 25 inches from the eyes – but everyone is different. Contacts or glasses will also have an effect. To find the best monitor distance, start with the screen at about arm's distance and then move the monitor closer or farther from your eyes until you achieve a viewing distance that lets you focus easily while you are sitting in working position with your back against your chair's backrest.

Throughout the house and office, place your most frequently looked-at items in the easiest viewing positions: at or just below eye level and in front of you at a comfortable distance. Making things easy on your eyes can make them easier on your body as well.

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