

A design-system decision, hiding in plain text.

York Press already publishes Arabic at different vowel-mark densities. Whoever builds the new platform will decide how to handle that, whether they mean to or not: on purpose, early, as a choice, or by default, later, once the first component ships.

THE SAME LIBRARY, DIFFERENT TREATMENTS

Some York Press Arabic carries full vowel marks. Some carries almost none. Both of these are live on Online Butterfly right now:

FULLY MARKED

تشكيل كامل

مجموعة الحيوانات التي تُسمى الثدييات

EFFECTIVELY BARE

بلا تشكيل

آسيا هي القارة الأكبر في العالم وتغطي ثلث سطح اليابسة

This isn't a random inconsistency, this is York Press's own levelled-reader program in print, moving from heavily-supported early texts toward unvocalised text for advanced readers.

THE MARKS GROW THE LINE UPWARD, NOT OUTWARD

Vowel marks don't sit inline, they stack above and below the letters.

الثدييات

MARKED

الثدييات

BARE

SAME WORD · SAME SIZE · SAME BASELINE

*That asymmetry is why **line-height** can't just be nudged evenly. Space added evenly **wastes room below the line**, where it isn't needed, and still leaves marks **crowding the line above**, where it is.*

SC 1.4.12 – Text Spacing

1.5× is a resilience test, not a design prescription

WCAG does not require 1.5× as the product’s default line-height. It requires content to remain intact and operable when a user overrides line-height to at least 1.5×. Marked Arabic therefore needs two checks: conformance under the override, and readability at the type size and leading the product actually uses.

SC 1.4.12 – Letter Spacing

A joined script needs a script-aware test

The criterion includes letter-spacing of at least 0.12× the font size, but allows scripts to use only the spacing properties that apply to them. Because Arabic letters join, forced tracking may affect shaping differently across implementations. Test the override in target browsers, confirm the conformance interpretation, then test readability separately with Arabic readers.

SC 1.4.3 – Contrast

Passing 4.5:1 does not guarantee diacritic legibility

SC 1.4.3 measures contrast between text and its background. Marked Arabic can pass that ratio while thin diacritics still resolve poorly at small sizes or low pixel density. Treat this as a separate legibility risk: test the typeface, weight, size and rendering on the devices students actually use—in addition to checking contrast.

THE AXIS I'D FLAG BEFORE THE NEW SYSTEM LOCKS IT INTO A TOKEN

Not a spec, a proposal for what the design system needs to name as a decision, with a rough starting guess for each. The values are questions for a design review, not answers:

WHAT NEEDS NAMING	ROUGH GUESS	WHY
Leading, Marked Vs. Bare	~20% More For Marked	Clears The Mark Zone Without Stranding The Descender Band — Exact Ratio Untested
Minimum Body Size, Marked	Somewhere Near 20px	A Guess At Where Marks Stop Resolving On Low-DPI Hardware, Not A Measured Floor
Typeface, Marked Context	A Naskh Stack	Chosen For How It Handles Marks, Not Confirmed Against Your Brand Type

I'd treat every number here as a starting hypothesis. The values that actually go in the token file belong to whoever tests them on the devices your schools use, with students reading at the sizes they'll actually read at.

ONE ASYMMETRY WORTH FLAGGING

While it's still cheap to plan around: marks can be stripped from text programmatically, but not restored. Recovering them needs the word's grammatical case, which stripped text no longer carries. So whichever version ever gets treated as the master matters; deriving bare from marked costs nothing, the reverse means re-editing.

WHAT THIS ISN'T

- x **Not a critique of Online Butterfly.** It's a live product built on its own constraints . I used it as the nearest available sample of York Press Arabic, not as the thing to fix.
- x **Not measured on real hardware.** Every number here is a starting point for testing on the tablets and browsers your schools actually use, which I don't have access to.
- x **Not a full type system.** One axis, flagged early , sized to be argued with in a design review rather than admired.

HOW I'D SETTLE THE NUMBERS

1 Find the density split

Roughly what share of the library is marked. If it's most of it, the marked scale is the default and bare is the exception, that flips which one the system optimizes for.

2 Test on the worst screen in the room

Marked Arabic at the smallest intended size, on the cheapest tablet in a partner school. Diacritics fail first and get tested last.

3 Run the 1.4.12 override on Arabic specifically

Force the four spacing values on a marked article and look at what the letter-spacing clause does to the joins. Better to know now than in an audit.

4 Ask young readers, not adults

Whether marks help or clutter is age-dependent and not something a fluent adult can judge by looking. Six children across two age bands settles it faster than a debate will.