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How to write accessible information

Who is the information for? Know your audience.

Stop and think before you start. Make a note of the points you want to make in a logical order. It is easier to start something in the way you want than having to go back and change it.

Who is the document for?

- Remember **who you are producing the information for**: children, young people or adults, or even a wider audience.
- Find out how the audience will **receive and use** the information.
- For people living with learning disabilities, find out what **support** they will have to use the information.

Keep them involved in what you are doing. Find out:

- How much your audience can **understand** and **what suits them best**.
- The **best things** to use to communicate with them, which might be a combination of written text, symbols, pictures, photos, video.
- How much **support** they need to use the information.

Use the right language in the right way.

Keep the message simple. Complicated or abstract language represented in symbols will not make the information any easier to understand.

- Make sure information is in a **logical** order with a beginning, a middle and an end.

- Keep sentences **short and simple**, usually no longer than between 15 and 20 words, and keep them clear.
- Use shorter, **familiar words**, for example, say 'make' instead of 'construct', 'use' instead of 'utilise'.
- **Avoid negative** sentences, for example, use 'Walk' rather than 'Don't run'.
- Use **everyday examples** that your audience is familiar with and will understand.
- **Avoid jargon**, abbreviations and acronyms. If you have to use an acronym, explain what it stands for the first time you use it.
- Use **active** sentences rather than passive ones, for example, 'Finish the work' rather than 'The work needs to be finished'.
- **Be specific**; say 'Put the pens in the box' rather than 'Tidy up the table'.
- **Be consistent**. Use the same words and/or phrases, rather than saying the same thing in lots of different ways.
- Use **direct**, straightforward language.

Make your language clear and simple.

What is the message you are trying to get across, and what is relevant for your audience? For example, is a list of people who attended the meeting really important?

- Use **key points** and leave out details you don't need.
- Try not to use sentences with more than **3 key information words**. For example, 'The **mayor opened** the new **hospital**.'
- **Do not** use words and phrases in languages your audience may not understand. Use 'For example' instead of 'eg', use 'such as' instead of 'ie'.
- Use **personal** language, such as 'you' and 'we'.
- **Do not use abstract language**, where possible. For example, people living with learning disabilities may take language literally. They may confuse the meaning of ambiguous language or expressions. For example, 'He was stuck with his spellings' or 'They have fallen out with each other'.

- Use **clear grammar**. People living with learning disabilities often have difficulties with negatives, for example, 'We are not going swimming today' or 'The man can't see'.
- Write the way you speak. Use **basic, accurate punctuation**.
- Use figures for **numbers** rather than written in a word, for example, '1', not 'one'.
- **Avoid** using words like 'bimonthly' or 'via', which have more than one meaning.
- You can start a sentence with '**And**', '**But**' or '**Because**' if it helps the flow of what you are writing.
- You can use the **same word more than once** in a sentence.

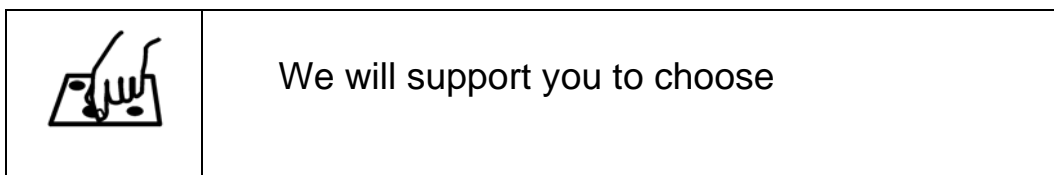
Plan the layout and design carefully.

If there is a wide mixture of possible communication support needs among your audience, you may need at least 2 versions of your document. The first version may be mostly written text. The next may need to be in 'Plain language' or 'Easy Words', using more pictures and/or symbols. Use **large print**, at least size 14 font, with a maximum of 4 lines of symbols/writing on each page.

- Use a **clear font**. Arial or Century Gothic bold is better. Some people might need special coloured paper, for example, blue text on yellow paper.
- Use **bullet points** for lists.
- Have clear headings in a **bold** larger type, never underlined or all in capitals.
- Use a mixture of **capital and small letters**. This is called, 'sentence case'. Do not put whole words in block capitals, for example, 'Somerset', not 'SOMERSET'.
- Start each sentence or new idea on a **separate line** with a space between lines.
- Keep long words together on the **same line**, for example, 'weekend'.
- Start and finish sentences on the **same page**.

- Highlight important points in **bold** or in a **larger font size**. Do not use *italics* or underlining, some people find them very hard to read.
- Use a ragged right margin, rather than lining up the right side. This means that you give your document even word spacing and this is called '**left aligned**' text.
- Have **clear sub-headings**, and where appropriate, a list of contents.
- Think about whether a bigger **A3** page size, or using landscape instead of portrait, might be better.
- Use **drawings, photos or symbols** to summarise the main points.
- It is clearer to put drawings, pictures, photos and/or symbols to the **left of the writing** rather than on top or underneath.

Example:



- Some people may prefer to receive information on **audio CD or video**.
- When the document is finished, **ask a sample of your audience** if the information is clear, appropriate and if they think any changes are needed.

Do you need photos, drawings or symbols?

Find out what would work best for the people you are communicating with. Decide whether a drawing, photo or symbol would suit your information best.

- Photos must be **clear**.
- Photos are good at illustrating **specific things**, such as a person or a place.
- Drawings are good for **supporting** information by giving detailed information.
- Illustrations, clip art and photos may contain **too much detail** for a general concept and this might make things more confusing.

Using drawings, photos, pictures or symbols

- Make sure the drawing, photo or symbol is **to the left of** the correct text.
- Clear drawings or photographs usually carry more information and **meaning** than a symbol.
- **Ask your audience** if the drawings are childish, patronising or confusing.
- Decide whether photos would show a **clearer** message.
- Use photos that clearly **show only what you mean**.
- If you are using a photo of a person, **always ask them** if you can use it first. Use a consent form so that you have a record of their permission to use the photo.

Using symbols.

When you use symbols it is important to think about how much the people you are communicating with will understand. Only use symbols which mean something to them, for example, using abstract symbols is no good if your audience has never seen them before.

- Make sure symbols are **clearly labelled** with text.
- Make sure symbols are the **right size** and spaced so that they can be seen clearly.
- **Do not use a lot of symbols** – a page of symbols can be very confusing.
- Only use symbols for **key words**.
- Some words have more **than one meaning**. Make sure you use the correct symbol for what you mean.

Example



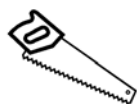
glasses



glasses



saw



saw

Always check that the symbols you use are appropriate and meaningful – this can be done by simply covering up the text, ‘reading’ the symbols and seeing what you understand from them.

Which symbols?

If you are using symbols:

- **Do not** use lots of symbols, unless you know your audience understands them.
- **Do not** use symbols for every word. This can be very confusing. Only use symbols for **key meaning words**. These are the words that give the message and cannot be predicted.

Example



The man drove the car in the garage

1

2

3

- Words such as ‘in’ and ‘on’ do not usually need a symbol, as their use can often be easily predicted. Such words only need a symbol if used in an unusual situation, for example, ‘The man put the car ‘on’ the garage’ or ‘under’ the garage, rather than ‘in’ it.
- The same advice applies if you are using verbs. ‘Drove’ could be predicted, as this is what you normally do with cars, so do not use a symbol. If the action is not easily predicted, for example, ‘The man **pushed** the car’, then the verb would be a key word and should have a symbol.
- Put the **main message** of the sentence **first**, to give the context.

Example



Our bus service is comfortable and prompt.....

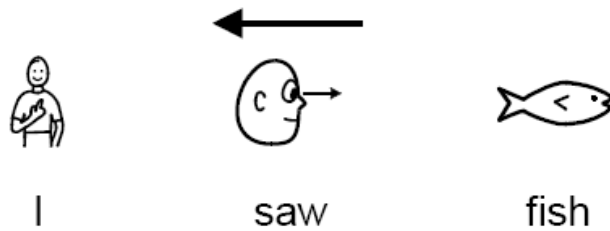
Not



Our comfortable prompt bus service.....

- Symbols have different meanings depending on the **context**. It is important that each symbol is relevant to the context it is being used in.

Example



Not



- Avoid using pronouns, for example, 'he/she/we/them/it'. Use the noun instead.

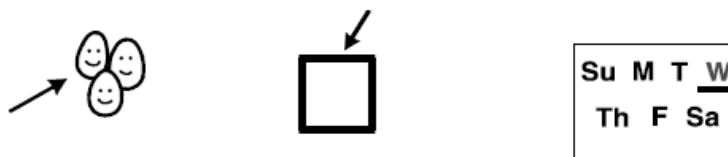
Example

You should write:



Your rubbish will be picked up by the refuse collectors on Wednesday.

You should not write:



They will collect it on Wednesday

- Look at the **symbols without the text** to make sure that all the keywords are included in the message.

Example symbols from: Information for All (2004) Using Symbols Guidance. Bristol: Norah Fry Institute.

Finally.

Check your document thoroughly. Check that your spelling, tone of language and spacing are accurate and consistent. If you have used pictures or symbols, check that they are easy to understand.

Always ask someone else to read what you have written and see if the way you have laid your document out is right for your audience. The person you ask should be able to point out spelling mistakes and whether the layout is consistent.

It is surprising what someone else will notice that you have missed because you can become over-familiar with your own work.

If you are happy with your finished document and you have had it checked by someone else, tested it on your audience and made any changes they have suggested, then you are ready to use it.

Your checklist for creating accessible information

- Know your audience and keep them in mind at every stage
- Decide what you want to tell your audience
- Make your language clear, simple and easy to understand
- Plan the layout and design
- Add drawings, photos, pictures or symbols if you need them
- Make sure you have someone's consent if you use their photo
- Think about using audio or video and other ways of communicating
- Check it out with your audience
- Ask someone else to check that your document is consistent
- Think about the changes they might have suggested