


Guidelines for making information easy to read and understand for people with learning disabilities

3. Doing





***“Use stories
about people. Stories
make it more real and
easier to understand.”***

Contents

	Page
Introduction	4
Content	5
Words, sentences, structure and grammar	7
Numbers	10
Overall layout and design	11
Graphics	14
Fonts and layout of text	17
Making sure digital information can be read by a screen reader	18
Leaflets and booklets	19
Easy Read originals	19
Easy Read versions	20
Everyday	20
Letters	21
Easy Read letters	21
Everyday letters	22
Consultation papers and reports	23
Easy Read	23
Everyday	25

3. Doing

Introduction

Making something accessible is far more than just the choice of words. You need to think about:

- content
- words, sentences, structure and grammar
- numbers
- overall layout and design
- graphics
- fonts and layout
- making sure digital information can be read by a screen reader.

Making information easy to understand for a target group is anything but easy. This chapter should make your task easier by providing some technical guidelines.

These guidelines are drawn from existing guidelines for Easy Read, NIACE's guidelines on Readability and numerous articles on health literacy. These are all listed in **Finding out more**.

This chapter begins with some general rules, and goes on to specific guidelines for letters, leaflets and reports.

3. Doing

Content

Your aim is to:


- make it immediately clear what the document is about
- include all the key messages and facts
- explain any jargon before you start reading
- make it easy to find the information that applies to you
- put the information in the order of any actions or decisions you need to take.

Targeting the content allows you to provide the information someone needs, without them having to wade through information that does not apply to them. For example, if you are producing information about Direct Payments, you may want to produce one leaflet targeted at parents/carers of children, one leaflet for young people making the move from children's to adults' services and one leaflet for adults. That way, you can provide targeted information so each group gets exactly the information they need. People may find this much more accessible than one booklet that covers everything about Direct Payments.

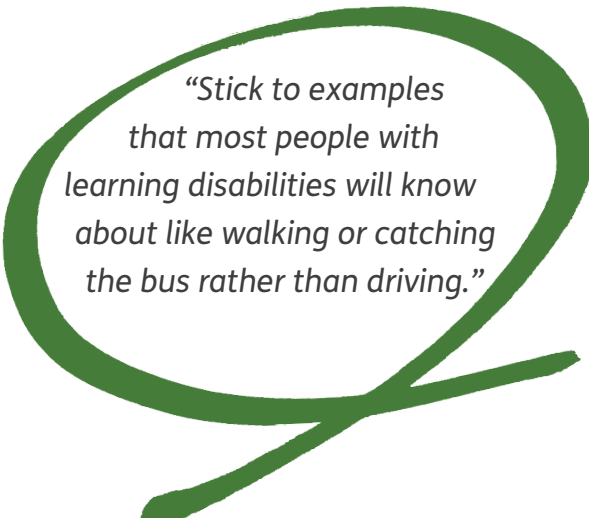
It is important to cluster information around the needs of your audience, and not the kind of services that you provide. For example, one booklet for parents/carers is more helpful than having to find the sections that apply to parents/carers from 6 different service-based booklets.

The content needs to be long-lasting, accurate and based on expert knowledge. It is extremely discouraging for people when they get out-of-date information, and can be dangerous if people are given inaccurate information. Knowing that information comes from experts can also help reassure the audience that they can rely on the information you are providing.

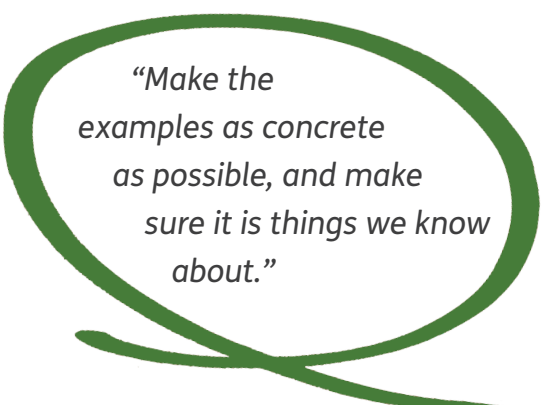
3. Doing




The Local Health Board communications officer asked John and the other panel members for tips on content:



“Stick to examples that most people with learning disabilities will know about like walking or catching the bus rather than driving.”



“Make the examples as concrete as possible, and make sure it is things we know about.”



“Use stories about people. Stories make it more real and easier to understand.”

3. Doing

Words, sentences, structure and grammar

Writing in Everyday or Easy Read style is about making information easier to read and understand. This means you may need to break some of the traditional rules you may have learned at school. For example:

- You can start a sentence with 'And' or 'But'.
- Repeat words, rather than use variety for interest.
- Whenever possible, repeat a noun rather than use a pronoun.



The meeting was last week. The meeting was helpful.



The meeting was last week. It was helpful.

It may feel awkward. But it saves people needing to read backwards and forwards to make sense of your writing.

Keep sentences short. If you have used a comma, hyphen, brackets or 'and', see if you can split the sentence into two or more short sentences. For Easy Read, aim to have a maximum of 12 words per sentence. For Everyday, aim for most sentences to have 15-20 words.

Keeping sentences to 12 words or fewer is challenging, and the sentences may feel stilted and artificial. However, keeping sentences this short makes a big difference to people who use Easy Read.

Keep paragraphs short. There should only be one idea or topic per paragraph.

3. Doing

Sentences need to be structured carefully.



“If you are unwell, please phone the doctor.”

The person knows that the rest of the sentence only applies if they are unwell. So if they are well, they know they do not need to do what it says in the rest of the sentence.



“Please phone the doctor if you are unwell.”

The person will begin focusing on phoning the doctor, and this is the information that will stick in their mind. They may not take in the second part of the sentence (‘if you are unwell’) and phone the doctor unnecessarily.

If you have been trained to read and write official reports or academic papers, you may initially find the Everyday style very difficult to use.

Everyday breaks many of the conventions of professional and academic writing, for example in Everyday you:

- Only use words that your audience would use in everyday speech. Words you may take for granted may be jargon to someone else.
- Use full words, not abbreviations or acronyms (unless an organisation’s official name is an acronym).
- Use the active voice, not passive. For example, say ‘We wrote this leaflet’ rather than ‘This leaflet was written by us’.
- Use ‘I’ or ‘you’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘the reader’.
- Use literal, precise language. If someone struggles to read, they will not welcome struggling through waffle or clichés. Most people find it easier to understand the meaning of ‘3 people’ than ‘a few people’.
- Write in the positive because the brain filters out the word ‘not’! If you have to use ‘not’, make sure your meaning is very clear, possibly by putting the word in bold or putting a red cross by the sentence.

3. Doing

If you are writing health information, you may want to check the Plain English Campaign's guide **How to write medical information in plain English**. It includes a helpful set of medical jargon with suggested easier words.

Unfortunately, sometimes a single word of jargon needs a whole sentence of easier words to explain it. If this is a problem, you may want to use some medical jargon. If you do this, always explain the jargon at the start of the document. Every time you use the jargon, put it in bold or in a different colour so people know they can check the list at the start to find out what it means. If your document is full of words in bold, you are using too much jargon.

3. Doing

Numbers

Many people struggle with numbers. There are some things you can do to make life easier for them.

- In Everyday and Easy Read, use the 12 hour clock. This means you would say 'The meeting starts at 2pm' rather than 'The meeting starts at 14:00'.
- In Everyday and Easy Read, if you need to use fractions, use '1 in 10' rather than 10% or $\frac{1}{10}$. You can help some people by using pictures, for example, a picture of 10 people with an arrow pointing to one person who is coloured differently from the others. You will probably confuse people if you try to use pie charts, graphs or tables.
- In Easy Read, write all numbers as figures, even if they are less than 10 (for example, 'you may bring 1 person with you').

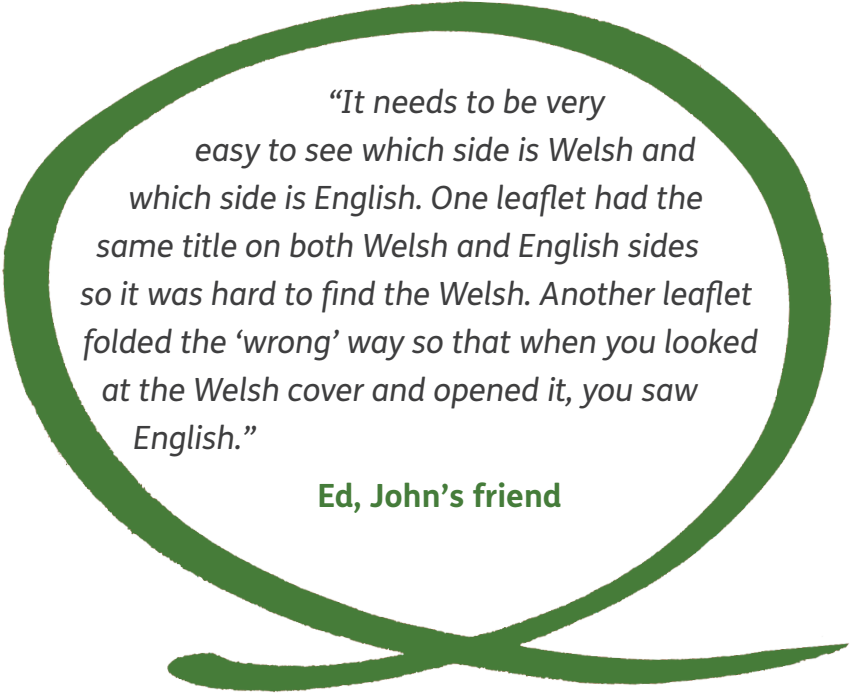
3. Doing

Overall layout and design

People look at a document and make an instant judgement about:

- what they think the document is about, or whether it is unclear
- whether the document is relevant to them
- whether the document looks friendly and easy to read.

If someone gets all this information at their first glance, they are more likely to pick the document up and make the effort to read it. A document with an inaccessible design is likely to be left on the shelf unread even if the information is essential and written in a very accessible style.



"It needs to be very easy to see which side is Welsh and which side is English. One leaflet had the same title on both Welsh and English sides so it was hard to find the Welsh. Another leaflet folded the 'wrong' way so that when you looked at the Welsh cover and opened it, you saw English."

Ed, John's friend

Design is important for everyone, but for some people your design may prevent them accessing the information at all. For example, a person with dyslexia may need coloured paper that reduces the brightness contrast between the page and text. Another person who has a visual impairment may need greater contrast between the page and text.

3. Doing

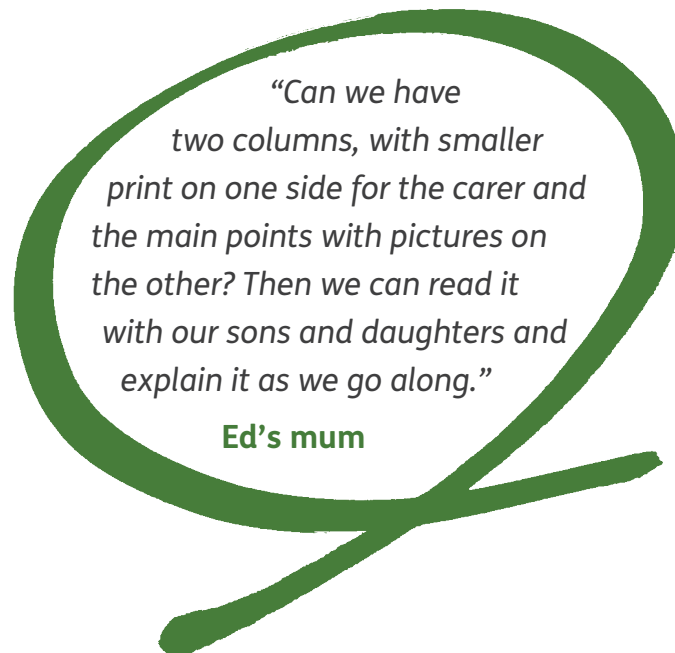
Photographs are often used for a professional look, but photographs may be difficult for some people with visual impairments to interpret and difficult for some people with autistic spectrum disorder to generalise. Design is also important for making bilingual documents accessible to everyone, whether they use one or both languages.

Some design rules work well for almost everyone:

- Use non-glossy paper. This cuts glare and makes it easier to read the text.
- Use good quality paper. This helps people who have low manual dexterity because the paper is less likely to crumple. It also means that when the paper is put on a surface, the surface does not show through the paper or text show through from the other side.
- Use off-white or very pale coloured paper. This helps people who struggle with glare, but still leaves enough contrast for people with visual impairments.
- Keep the background plain. This keeps the page uncluttered. It also makes it easier to see the text.
- Have a heading at the top of every page.
- Use clear page numbers.
- Leave large areas of blank space on the page. Aim for a maximum of 200 words per side of A4 for Everyday, and a maximum of 120 words per side of A4 for Easy Read.
- If you use columns, put a line between the columns, and leave plenty of blank space either side of the line.

Colour-coding can be a great help if a lot of papers are being given out. People can then be told the colour as well as the page number that they need to turn to.

3. Doing



For Easy Read, there are some additional rules:

- Only write about one topic per page. If the topic needs more than one page, start the next page with a heading saying "More about..."
- Always start and finish the sentence on the same page.
- Lay out addresses like addresses on envelopes. This helps people spot the address within a page of text.
- Include a photograph of the person who wrote the information if possible.
- Use the same basic design for all your documents, so people get used to your design.
- Avoid capital letters because they make it harder to recognise the shape of common words.
- If you have a choice of words, go for the word with the more distinct word shape.
- Always read your writing out loud, or ask someone from your audience to read it out loud. Many of your audience will have the document read to them, so you need to make sure it makes sense when read out loud.
- Include the key points in a box.

3. Doing

Graphics

Graphics have two functions: to help convey the message, and to make the document look friendly and accessible.

Graphics include photographs, pictures, cartoons, line drawings, symbols and signs. Whatever kind of graphic is used, it is important that the meaning is clear.

It is important that any graphics are high quality, age-appropriate and that you have any copyright required.

In Easy Read, graphics can be used to support the text or even to replace text. The convention is to put the graphics to the left of the writing or above the writing. This is so the person already has some idea what they are going to read before they get to the text.

The Easy Read style always includes graphics. Different people have different preferences for types of graphics. It is important to know your audience, their preferences and any difficulties they may have using some of the types of graphics. Try to develop a 'house style' so people get used to the type of graphics you use. Here is a list of some of the types of graphics commonly used in Easy Read documents:

Clipart

The advantage is that there are large collections of clipart available for free on the internet, as well as specialist collections. The disadvantage is that some clipart looks childish and amateur.

Change Picturebank

The advantage is that pictures are line drawings so they are more accessible to people with visual impairments or who find it hard to generalise from photographs. The disadvantage is the cost and the limited range of drawings.

www.changepeople.co.uk

Phone 0113 388 0011

Email info@change-people.co.uk

3. Doing

Photosymbols

The advantage is that these are high quality, professional-looking photographs. The disadvantage is that some people find photographs hard to generalise. Photosymbols largely uses people with learning disabilities as models. This is not a problem if your audience consists of people with learning disabilities. However, it makes Easy Read less accessible to people who need the simplicity of Easy Read text but who do not have learning disabilities (such as people who are learning English or Welsh).

www.photosymbols.com

Phone 0117 959 4424

Email ask@photosymbols.com

Valuing People Clipart

A wide range of solid colour clipart. Can be bought individually, in bulk or on subscription. Can be used online. Some people with learning disabilities relate to clipart better than photos. It is a matter of individual preference. It is an English based collection so there are no images in Welsh.

www.valuingpeopleclipart.org.uk

Phone 0800 0430 980

Email info@inspiredservices.org.uk

Inspired Images Photo collection

A collection of low-cost, high quality photographs of people with learning disabilities, people who support services, older people, children and carers. You can buy them individually at £40 per photo or less if you buy in bulk. The advantage is that they are high quality and professional. Some people prefer photos to clipart. The disadvantage is they may be too expensive for some people to afford.

www.inspiredphotos.org.uk

Phone 0800 0430 980

Email info@inspiredservices.org.uk

3. Doing

Rebus, Widgit and Makaton symbols

These symbols are invaluable for people who are familiar with them. The disadvantage is that the meaning of many of the symbols is not immediately obvious and is rather like learning a new language.

www.widgit.com

Phone 01926 333680

Email info@widgit.com

www.makaton.org

Phone 01276 606760

Email info@makaton.org

3. Doing

Fonts and layout of text

The text itself is most accessible with:

- a plain sans serif font like Arial or FS Me. FS Me is Mencap's font. It was co-designed by Fontsmith and people with learning disabilities. It is clear, but not childish. The text in this document is FS Me.
- a minimum of 14 point for Everyday writing and a minimum of 16 point for Easy Read writing. If you are writing for people who use large print, use a minimum of 20 point.
- a maximum of 70 letters and spaces per line for Everyday, and a maximum of 50 letters and spaces per line for Easy Read
- either 1.5 or 2 spacing between lines
- words that are not split between two lines (i.e. no hyphenation)
- short paragraphs
- bullet points, rather than long sentences
- emphasis by using bold type or boxes, rather than italics or capitals
- left aligned text and a ragged right line edge (i.e. not justified).

3. Doing

Making sure digital information can be read by a screen reader

If you plan to share your information digitally, via email or uploading it onto a website, you should make sure it can be read by a screen reader. A screen reader is a software application that enables people with severe visual impairments to use a computer. It is also used by some people with learning disabilities who have difficulty reading.

There are a few places you can go to find information and help on creating digitally accessible documents.

Adobe Accessibility Resource Centre

www.adobe.com/accessibility

Digital Accessibility Centre

Digital Accessibility Centre, Neath, South Wales

www.digitalaccessibilitycentre.org

Phone 01792 815267

email info@digitalaccessibilitycentre.org

BBC Guide to the essentials of creating accessible PDFs with Microsoft Word and Acrobat Professional 8 www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/futuremedia/accessibility/bbc_accessible_pdf_master17.pdf

More information on screen readers can be found at www.nomensa.com/blog/2005/what-is-a-screen-reader

3. Doing

Leaflets and booklets

Easy Read originals

Many leaflets and booklets are written specifically for people with learning disabilities. Even if there is a general public leaflet or booklet about the subject, it is much better to go back to the key points and write a new leaflet or booklet in Easy Read. This gives much more freedom to produce information that really meets the needs of people with learning disabilities.

All the general guidelines for Easy Read apply to leaflets and short booklets.

All booklets and most leaflets have a front cover or front page. Here is a suggested layout for the front cover:

- large, clear, relevant picture
- large print title. The title must use easy words and say what the leaflet is about. Plays on words or funny titles can make it harder for someone to know what the leaflet is about, so avoid words that have more than one meaning.
- logos and names of the organisations that produced the leaflet
- date the leaflet was produced.

Booklets and leaflets may have a back cover or back page. Here is a suggested layout for the back cover:

- logo or photos of the author or organisation
- contact details for the author or organisation
- other versions of the leaflet or booklet and how to get them
- in a smaller font size, credits for the graphics (if you have used other people's graphics) and any funders or organisations that helped with the leaflet or booklet.

If the leaflet or booklet is being written specifically for people with learning disabilities, work with a group of people with learning disabilities to produce it. For example, if it is about health promotion, go to a college or self-advocacy group that is already thinking about health promotion and get their help to design the leaflet.

3. Doing

Working together on information leaflets and booklets is an opportunity for what is called co-production. You bring expert knowledge about the subject and the information that people need; the group bring expert knowledge about reading information. It is important to value each other's expertise.

Easy Read versions

Occasionally, a leaflet or booklet needs to be an Easy Read version of a public information leaflet. For example, in 2010 the Welsh Government wanted to get information to the public about swine flu, and produced it in a number of formats including Easy Read.

Easy Read versions will normally need to cut out some of the information from the original version. The Easy Read needs to focus on the key actions someone must take. For example, knowing how to protect yourself from swine flu is more important than understanding what swine flu is.

Everyday

If leaflets and short booklets are written for the general public, they should be written in Everyday writing. Just follow the general guide for Everyday and general good practice for leaflet design.

3. Doing

Letters

Easy Read letters

For the envelope:

- Minimum 14 point address.
- You may want to put the person's full name rather than just their initial and family name.
- Typed or clearly printed – no joined up/cursive handwriting.
- Easy to open.

For the layout:

- Make sure there is plenty of space.
- Some letters include contact details. Always lay out addresses the same way you would on an envelope. If possible, use standard symbols/icons in the left margin next to the contact details.
- Use 14 point sans serif font, like Arial or FS Me.

For the headings:

- Always use a heading.
- Put headings in bold.
- Use easy words.
- Put the most important thing to know at the start of the heading.

3. Doing

For the body of the letter:

- Put the information in the order someone needs it.
- Follow the general rules for Easy Read writing.
- Put any dates, times or places in bold.
- If the person needs to take action:
 - > *put that action on a new line*
 - > *put a symbol/icon in the left margin so it is very clear that the person needs to take action.*
- If the person needs to contact someone, put the contact details in the letter starting on a new line.

Finishing the letter:

- Make sure it is easy to see the person's name.
- Make sure it is easy to see the person's job title.

Everyday Letters

Follow the general rules for Everyday writing for all letters to the general public, unless you know you are writing to someone with learning disabilities or someone who has asked to receive information in Easy Read.

3. Doing

Consultation papers and reports

These are, by their very nature, going to be longer documents. They are also specialist documents. Most people in the UK never read consultation papers and reports. The people who do read them usually already have an interest in public services, research, policies or politics.

It is very important that consultation papers and reports are available in Easy Read and, unless the main version is already written in a very plain, clear style, in an Everyday version.

Easy Read

If there is an Everyday version (or the original is in Everyday writing), the Easy Read document is free to be a summary of the original. This means it can be shorter.

The Department of Health guidelines say 15 pages is the maximum length. Clearly, a 100 page consultation document cannot be turned into a 15 page Easy Read without leaving out a lot of information.

Leaving out information is tricky. It can feel like censorship. In fact, it can be censorship. Some Easy Read documents leave out facts that the producer feels are too hard to understand or too unpleasant for people with learning disabilities. The Easy Read can become a bland document that is easy to read but contains nothing of substance. It is important to include all the information that someone needs in order to make an informed response to a consultation or to make use of the information in a report.

It is important to sit with your target group and work through the document. Your task is to summarise what is in each section and the significance of that information. It is for the target group to suggest what information is essential and what information is less important to them. You may find it helpful to record this session, as often the words you use to summarise a paragraph will be good words to use in the Easy Read.

As people read more consultation papers and reports, they get used to the style and it becomes easier to read them. You can help by always using the same writing style, layout and graphics.

3. Doing

A suggested outline is:

- Front cover with:
 - > *large, short title and picture in the middle*
 - > *full title at the bottom, along with the date of the publication*
 - > *logos either at the top or bottom. They need to be big enough to see clearly, but much smaller than the title and picture.*
- Contents page
- Welcome from the author, including:
 - > *a reminder that people who want more information can read the Everyday or original versions*
 - > *a photo of the author. This encourages people to read and respond to consultation documents if they think they are responding to a real person rather than a faceless bureaucracy.*
- List of difficult words and what they mean
- The main report of about 10 pages
- Final page with:
 - > *reminder that there is an Everyday or original version with more information*
 - > *contact details for the people who wrote the original document*
 - > *other versions of the document*
 - > *who produced the Easy Read and who produced the graphics (if there is a back cover, then this can go on the back cover instead of the final page).*

3. Doing

Everyday

The role of the Everyday version is to make sure that most of the general public can pick up the consultation paper or report, think it looks readable, and be able to read it first time without needing a dictionary or puzzling over any sentence or paragraph. This version includes all the information from the original. It may also include boxes to explain important technical words or a particular piece of jargon that it is worth learning.

When preparing an Everyday version, you may need to go back to the author and ask him/her to clarify their meaning. This is because there is a common style of policy writing that uses general phrases that can have several meanings.

© Learning Disability Wales / Mencap Cymru / All Wales People First /
All Wales Forum of Parents and Carers 2012

For more copies of these guidelines contact Learning Disability Wales

Phone 029 2068 1160

Email enquiries@learningdisabilitywales.org.uk

Front cover photo: Mencap

