

Manchester People First



# Making information easier for everyone

How to make documents easier to read





## Introduction

Manchester People First is a self-advocacy group for adults with a learning disability.

We have written this guide as part of our 'Join Us, Join In' project to make it easier for people with a learning disability to take part in meetings. The Ambition for Ageing Equalities Board have funded the project.

The guide is for people who work with organisations who run meetings and anyone else who wants to make their written information easier to understand.

- **Part 1** tells you why you should do this Page 3
- **Part 2** has practical tips about how to do this Page 7



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# Part 1

## Why you should make information easier to understand

### It is better for everybody

Organisations know they should get rid of barriers that make meetings less accessible to people who have physical impairments. But not everyone remembers the law says they also need to do this for people with a learning disability.



A lot of the things you can do to help people with a learning disability also help people who have:

- Physical impairments
- Visual impairments
- Communication aids or an interpreter
- Literacy issues
- A first language that is not English
- Better things to do than sit in meetings reading reports

## Why we should do this



Most meetings are about:

- Making decisions about things
- Telling people something
- Finding out what people think

To be involved and make real, informed choices, people need information.

But information can only be used if it can be understood.

## Laws

The Equality Act 2010 says service providers must make 'reasonable adjustments' so a disabled person is not put at a big disadvantage to a person who is not disabled. It says having information in accessible formats is a reasonable adjustment.



The Care Act 2014 says Local Authorities must make information and advice about a service accessible to people who are getting that service.



The Accessible Information Standard was introduced in 2016. Any organisation which offers NHS or adult social care, must keep a record of people's communication and information needs and give them information this way.

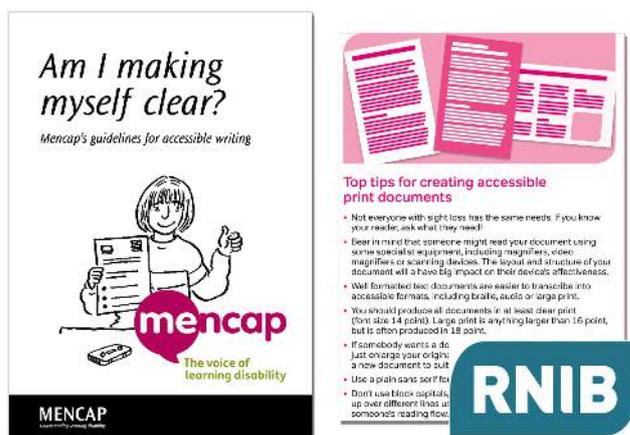
**But you should make information accessible, not because you are made to, but because it is the right thing to do, and it will help you benefit from all the skills, ideas and experience people with a learning disability have.**



## All for one, one for all

Instead of thinking you should make special simplified versions of documents for particular groups, it is better to make one version of a document that more people can use. It is better because:

- It is cheaper and more inclusive.
- It is closer to the social model of disability, rather than the medical model of disability that sees people's needs as 'problems'.
- Having a simple written document makes it easier to do versions in other languages and other formats such as audio versions.



It is common to offer large print versions of documents for people who have a visual impairment. The Royal National Institute for the Blind's 'See it Right' guidelines say text should have a point size between 14 and 16. This is also the size for text Mencap recommend in their 'Making Myself Clear' advice for making easy read documents for people with a learning disability.

## Why write?

Most people think of meetings as being mainly about taking and listening, but the written word can play a big part in making meetings easier for everyone to take part in.



The “Telephone Game” is where a line of people whisper a message from one person to the next.

When the message reaches the end of the line, the last person says the message out loud. This is compared to what the first person in the line was told the message was.

The two are often very different. The game is a way of showing that passing information verbally is not always accurate, but a written message does not change. But:

- It may not be the best way for everyone.
- The average reading age is lower than many people think.
- Some people can read the words, but have trouble understanding or following a series of written instructions.
- Not everyone can write clearly – This is not always about literacy – Think of notes left on the fridge door, or poorly worded emails where you have to phone the sender and ask what they meant.

## **Making it easy is not always easy**

It takes more thought to write clearly and simply. But if you can, it can help not just the reader, but you too. It makes you be clear about what you are saying. A lot of bad, wooly writing is caused by wooly thinking.

Some people think putting a lot of detail and description into a report shows they have worked harder. Remember the saying:

“I would have written you a shorter letter than this, but didn’t have the time.”

If you work for an organisation, think of the different things you have to read and write – Reports, minutes, records, bids newsletters, emails, and then think of how little training you have been given.

## **Ask and co-produce**

- Ask people how they want information, including other formats such as audio, or Braille.
- Give yourself enough time to produce other formats.
- Get people who may need more accessible information to tell you if they can understand the information you give them.
- Road test your documents – Get people to read them and watch how they do. It is not unusual for people to play down any problems they are having following a document.



# Part 2

## Things to do to make documents easier to read

It wastes time and costs money if you produce a 'normal' version and a 'simple' version of documents.

**Plan from the start to make every document you do easier to read.**

There are 2 things that can make a document easier to read.

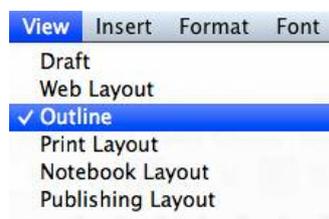
1. What you write – the words you use
2. How you present what you have written – the layout and design of the document

## What you write

### Keep it short, keep it simple

Do not start writing a report by writing a report, write a list.

- List the bare facts you want to tell people
- Put a star by the facts people actually need to know
- Put them in an order that makes sense
- Tick off each point on your list as you write.



Some word processing software lets you outline a document, which can help you work this way.



Having a learning disability often makes it harder to understand and remember complex, or new information, so:

- Do not go into too much detail if it is not needed
- Stick to the point. Only give background information if you have to and it helps people understand what you are saying now
- Give information in smaller 'bite-size pieces'
- Simplify information – Do you have to say "57%" or is saying "more than half" or "most" enough?

## **Sentences and punctuation**

- Keep sentences short – about 15 words
- One idea = One sentence
- Break down complex sentences and paragraphs into bullet points
- Use simple punctuation such as commas and full stops, not colons and semi-colons. Use dashes instead of brackets
- Do not let a sentence run over to the next page

## **The words you use**

- Do not shorten words with apostrophes.  
Write "do not" instead of "don't"
- Think about what you call documents and groups in the first place.  
Call a 'strategy' a 'plan', so you do not have to tell people the disability strategy is a plan about disability.
- Try not to use jargon, technical words or foreign expressions such as 'etc.'

- If you have to use precise legal terms explain them.  
“An accessory is someone who encourages or helps someone else to commit a crime”.
- Speak directly: ‘You’ and ‘We’ not ‘Greater Manchester Police’ and ‘members of the public’.
- Be consistent, use the same word. Say ‘delegate’ not ‘delegated’, then ‘attendee’, then ‘participant’.
- Give numbers as figures not words, ‘3’ instead of ‘three’.
- Use active rather than passive verbs:  
“The man was bitten by the dog” is passive.  
“The dog bit the man” is active.  
Active is shorter and more direct, so is better.
- Use simple, plain everyday words – “help” not “assistance”, “take part” instead of “participate”.

The Plain English Campaign, do free downloadable guides including: ‘The A to Z of alternative words’ which gives examples such as:

additional (extra)	on receipt (when we/you get)
advise (tell)	on request (if you ask)
commence (start)	should you wish (if you want)
complete (fill in)	particulars (details)
comply with (keep to)	per annum (a year)
consequently (so)	persons (people)
ensure (make sure)	purchase (buy)
forward (send)	regarding (about)
in the event of (if)	terminate (end)

[www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides)





## Acronyms

Explain acronyms as you go, do not hide them in a glossary at the back. Explaining is not just saying that “CCG stands for Clinical Commissioning Group”, but what a CCG is and what it does.

You can probably assume people know what the NHS or BBC are, but there are not many acronyms you can use without explaining.

## The layout and design of the document

### Clean and simple

There are things you can do that will make whatever you write easier to read. It will also look clean and simple.

If a page looks busy and complex it puts people off before they even start to try to read it.

### Size matters

Type size is measured in a unit called ‘points’ often written as ‘pt’. Text in a newspaper is often about 8pt.

10 or 12pt is normal for text in a report, but to be more accessible you should go for 14 or 16pt for the main text in your document, which is usually known as ‘body text’.

### Gaps between lines of text

This is called ‘leading’ (pronounced ‘ledding’).

Most word processing software will automatically set the leading for a 1 line gap, but setting it to 1.5 lines makes the text easier to follow.

## Type style

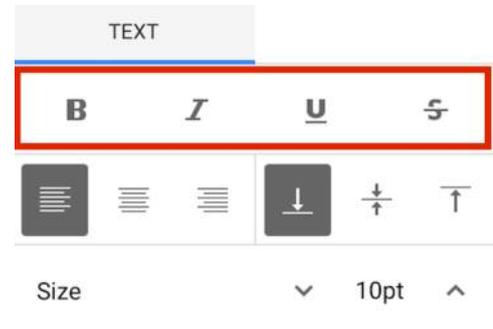
Do not write in **UPPERCASE** letters (capital letters) unless it is an acronym, such as NHS or BBC.

Do not underline text

or put it in *italics*

to make it stand out.

It makes words harder to read.



Use **bold** to make a word stand out.



Left align your text (set it so it lines up in a straight line on the left margin, while the right margin can be 'ragged')



Centered text should be saved for gravestones and menus



Justified text can leave odd gaps between words



Right aligned text makes it harder for the eye to move from the end of 1 line to the beginning of the next line

## Reverse text

Do not put white text on a black background (WOB)



## Fonts

- There are lots of different fonts or typefaces.
- Do not try to use them all. Stick to 2 or 3 in a document
- Use a sans serif font.

Serifs are curly flourishes at the end of letters  
San serif (without serifs) fonts do not have them  
and for some people seem easier to read.



San serif fonts such as

**Arial, Helvetica or Verdana**

are usually easier to read than serif fonts, such as

**Times, Baskerville, or Georgia**

Do not use fancy 'display' fonts such as

**Comic Sans, ROSEWOOD, or Party**

## Columns



Do not set text in columns they can lead to very short lines. Partially sighted people find pages set this way are harder to navigate.

## Margins



Having wider margins makes the page look less wordy. Some people like to hold a document up to read, it stops their thumbs hiding the text.

## Gaps between paragraphs

Break blocks of text down into smaller pieces, by having space between paragraphs. Make the page seem less dense with words.

## Subheadings

Use subheadings to break up blocks of text and help people move through a document.

Subheadings are usually 2pt bigger than the body text.

## Colour

Usually black text on a white background is easiest to read. People who are partially sighted may find text harder to read if there is not enough contrast between text and background. But some people with a learning disability or some sorts of dyslexia find black text on yellow paper easier.

## Hyphenation

Do not hyphenate words (let them break over 2 lines with a dash). It makes it harder to read.

If a sentence has to run over 1 line, try to break it after words like 'and' or 'but', so people do not think it is 2 separate sentences.

## Paper size and finish

Usually stick to A4 as it gives enough room for words, wide margins and pictures and it fits copyholders and scanners.

Do not use shiny paper, as reflections cause problems.

Some people may want to write notes on documents.

## Pictures



A picture may be worth a 1000 words, but people can interpret them differently, so they cannot replace words.

'Easy Read' is a way of making information more accessible by having pictures next to very simple text. The text follows many of the rules in this guide. Pictures are usually to the left of the text they are about.



Getting appropriate pictures can be a problem. Most clip art is aimed at business users, so does not show people in situations that are relevant. It can be quite abstract and rarely features people with disabilities.

There are picture libraries that are more suitable, such as

made with  
**photosymbols**<sup>®</sup>

[www.photosymbols.com](http://www.photosymbols.com)



**just info**

*Accessible information by Manchester People First*

Manchester People First have a project called Just Info. We make documents easier to understand.

We have worked with organisations including councils, universities, the NHS police, and voluntary sector groups.

If you want to know more, or want a quote for some work, please get in touch.

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**Spirit of Manchester**  
Awards 2017 Winner

Company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales, our number is 6339300. We are a charity, our number is: 1124426