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No Justice Without Clear Language

by **Janet Pringle**

I am not a literacy tutor, but a writer of materials for people with limited literacy. My job is to give people readable materials, not to change their abilities. This is the other side of the literacy coin. Whether the reading and comprehension limitations are temporary (for instance, if English is a new language) or more permanent, these readers still deserve to have usable information. Without accessible materials, we do not have a just society. Hard-to-read documents are as much of a barrier to people with limited literacy as are steps for people who use wheelchairs.

My work is primarily intended for people with developmental disabilities—an excluded and frequently ignored section of the population.

Frances Maleski helping Janet translate a document.

When I am asked to create a plain language brochure, report, or list of instructions, for example, I usually begin by writing the first draft alone, using language that I think will be clear. Then I work with teams of two or three 'translators' with developmental disabilities. They are the experts in this field and they tell me what they understand. For me to claim I know exactly what words to use would be guesswork. I don't have their experience and I don't speak for them. I also ask them to critique illustrations. A shared understanding of a picture often comes from shared life experiences, and people with disabilities may have missed out on many of the formative experiences of people without disabilities.

The team works for about two hours at a stretch. Those who can, read the text aloud, in short sections. After each section we stop and talk about the meaning. Sometimes I need to explain a part if no one else in the group understands. But together we look for the clearest way to write each section. Later, I redraft the materials, as most of the other team members are uncomfortable using a computer.

It takes time for translators to become confident about saying when they don't understand. Which of us enjoys admitting ignorance? But with reassurance that this in no way diminishes their worth, and that I depend on their honesty to help me, they become confident in saying when a word stumps them. Over time, they have understood they are entitled to clear information. Hard-to-understand documents can mean the writer needs to try again, not that the readers are failures.

It is a positive side effect that translators do, in fact, learn to read more fluently while they work with me, even though that is not my main aim. There is a

story I like to tell about that.

I used to work with one woman (I'll call her Ruth) who read very little. Usually her method of reading was to glance very briefly at a word and then look at my face, as if to find the answer there.

After we had worked together for four years, Ruth and I went to three small towns in Alberta to give presentations about our plain language translation work. Her section of the presentation was done with me in a question and answer format, as she could not read enough or memorize enough to present without some support. She was excited to be on these trips: to stay in motels, eat in restaurants, be acclaimed by audiences, and see a little of our province. But the confidence she gained from these experiences went beyond just becoming more comfortable with speaking in public. The next time we met to translate a document, she began to read—not every word—but enough to make a huge leap from where she (and I) thought she was. Now she reads even more, still not fluently, but enough to keep her interested in learning.

Most of the translators I work with have gained knowledge from the materials we have worked on. Health issues; finding a home, a lawyer or a doctor; what happens if you are caught shoplifting, or if you split up with your partner; as well as information from the government department that funds services for people with developmental disabilities—all these topics, and more, have added to their awareness.

For many people with developmental disabilities in Alberta, plain language is a familiar term to many people and they ask for it now. Many have told the Ministry responsible for their services that this is important to them. The board-governing system for people with developmental disabilities is divided into six regions in the province. One region produces its board minutes in plain language so that its service recipients understand more about their decisions. Other regions in the province are starting to produce a variety of plain language materials. People with English as a second language also use these materials and have expressed gratitude that they are available.

People with developmental disabilities who know they have a right to understand have grown in many areas. Many now speak up at meetings when they are given documents they cannot read. "Tell us in plain language," they now say, to their MLAs, or to government bureaucrats. They are challenging our leaders in ways that are really exciting to watch. At a major conference in Edmonton last year, many people with developmental disabilities attended a workshop on how to vote. As Walter Judd, an American doctor and politician, said, "People often say that, in a democracy, decisions are made by a majority of the people. Of course that is not true. Decisions are made by a majority of those who can make themselves heard and who vote—a very different thing." (www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/walter_h_judd.html)

At a women's support agency, I watched someone with a mild developmental disability slowly and carefully read through all the information she could find about the positions of different parties on various issues before she made up her mind who to vote for. I wish that everyone took so much care!

Plain language is becoming an acceptable 'buzzword'. But there is still a long way to go until people with limited literacy are genuinely accepted and valued in our society. We have learned that discrimination is not to be practiced against women or ethnic minorities. But society has yet to challenge, in any serious way, the stigma of having either low reading skills or limited intellectual ability.

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While people need courage to admit they have difficulty reading, it seems more fluent readers need courage too, to overcome their embarrassment in asking if someone has a reading problem. We are so aware of the stigma, we can perpetuate it by skirting around any acknowledgement of reading problems.

In my ideal world, two aspects would be different. There would be fewer literacy barriers. And someone would be able to say "Please be more clear. I have difficulty reading" just as easily as someone else would say "Speak up. I'm hard of hearing." ■

Janet Pringle has been creating low-literacy materials for ten years, with and for people who have developmental disabilities. She also teaches writing workshops and she co-presented at the 2002 Plain Language Association International Conference. That presentation is available at www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/conferences/2002/perspect/1.htm .