



The Little Guide to Easy Information

This is a short guide to some of the things you will need to think about when producing easy-read information. The main focus is on the production of 'mass communication' – presenting information to a wide range of people – such as letters, leaflets, and forms. It has been written by **easy on the i**, part of the Learning Disability Service's Involvement Team in Leeds Partnerships NHS Foundation Trust. **easy on the i** produce accessible documents for people with learning disabilities, based on well-established principles of making information easier to understand.

This guide is not a definitive 'how-to' guide to producing accessible information. Instead, it suggests some of the key things you will need to think about when producing information that is easier to understand. The main focus is on the style of presenting information used by **easy on the i**, particularly in relation to the use of images. There are examples to illustrate many of the ideas in this guide.

This guide talks about:

Knowing your audience – or not:

Mass communication

Testing your easy-read information

Some ideas about accessible information:

What are you talking about?

Symbols, pictures, photographs

Key principles for producing accessible information:

Layout

Lettering

Language

Knowing your audience – or not

There is no one 'right' way to produce easy-to-understand information. Each person will face different challenges and find different things helpful. These barriers are not just about difficulties with **producing** and **receiving** communication [eg. speech impairment, sensory impairment, low or no literacy], but also about difficulties in **understanding** communication [eg. difficulties in understanding abstract ideas, difficulties in remembering, difficulties understanding how ideas are related when words are linked in sentences].

Some people will have plans in place for how to support their communication. They may use alternative means of communicating such as sign language or speech output devices. Such interventions are likely to be in response to significant barriers to communication, and are likely to have been developed with the input of a Speech & Language Therapist. The people who provide direct care and support to the person may know them well and be familiar with the best ways to tell them things and find out what they have to say. While there may be a good level of support available to help access information, there may be greater barriers to understanding it.

Other people will have less – or no – support. This may reflect their having fewer or less severe barriers to communication, and they may well have the ability to understand longer and more complex information. This does not mean they will be able to understand everything they receive, and they are still likely to have significant difficulty understanding the messages of 'standard' information [eg. standard letters, information leaflets] without support.

Example: Ruth and the Summary Care Record letter

Ruth [not her real name] lives on her own. She can read well, but has difficulty understanding the more complicated information she receives. She also has some difficulty reading information where the writing is small and cramped together.

Ruth received a letter from the NHS, telling her about Summary Care Records. The letter was wordy, and she found the small writing hard to read, and the message hard to understand. She knew it was probably important – it was from the NHS, so it must be about her health. She thought there was probably something she needed to do. But she could not see on the letter who she should ask for help.

With the letter came a leaflet offering the information translated into different languages. On the list was an accessible version, which uses easy language, images and large print. But Ruth did not know this was available, because the letter she received was overwhelming, and the offer of an easier version was itself not easy to read.

Ruth has worked with **easy on the i** testing accessible information, and she rang us to ask for help. Because one of us had been sent the same letter, we were able to tell her what it was about. We explained what the Summary Care Record would say about her and what it would be used for. After getting this easy explanation of the information, she decided that she was happy to have a Summary Care Record.

Mass communication

In an ideal world, all communication would be tailored to each person's needs, with the format and content targeted to their individual capabilities. For mass communication it is not possible to do this. A more one-size-fits-all approach is needed. It is worth asking yourself some questions to help decide what the information might look like:

Who is your audience?

- Will all of your audience be people with learning disabilities – if not, will you produce two versions of the information, or will everybody get the easy-read version? If you produce two versions, how will you ensure people get the right version?
- If you need to communicate with just a few people, would the time it takes to produce accessible information be better spent talking to them?
- If you need to communicate with lots of people, is it worth paying a service to produce your information?

How will your audience get the information?

- If someone is giving the information directly to people, does that provide an opportunity for them to support someone to understand it?
- If it is a document that needs filling in – eg. a questionnaire or a form to complete and return – will support be available to help with this?

How will your audience use the information?

- Will your document just give information, or will action be required? Will it be clear what this action is? Will people need extra support to do this?

Are there other ways of supporting people to understand the information?

- Is there a person they could telephone for help understanding the information?
- Is there money available to make the information available as an audio or video recording?

What are your resources?

- Do you have access to symbol sets or picture banks? These are sets of images in one style that can be used to support your text. If you are producing information for an organisation that uses a particular style of image, your audience may already be familiar and more comfortable with that style.
- Is there money available for producing the information – is it worth paying a service to produce the documents for you?

Testing your easy-read information

It is impossible to overstate the value of testing your easy-read information. Ask people with learning disabilities to look at your documents and tell you what does and does not work. There may be established local groups who can do this for you – and who may be less worried about offending you if they say they do not understand your information. If you are regularly producing accessible information, it would be good to start a testing group of your own.

People with learning disabilities can be involved in creating information as well as testing it. Involving some of the people who will be the audience at an early stage can provide valuable insight into what should be in a document, what questions it might raise, and how it should be written.

Some ideas about accessible information

What are you talking about?

Whether writing accessible information from scratch, or adapting an existing document to make it easier to read, it is important to consider the **amount** and **complexity** of information that will be given. When producing easy-read information, less is very often more.

Large amounts of information can be confusing, and can make too many demands on people's memory. Consider whether the amount of information can be reduced, or whether it would be possible to deliver it in stages – though be aware that **not enough information** can also be problematic.

Example: appointment letter

Think about how you would make an appointment letter easy to understand. What information might you include?

Some information is vital – when and where the appointment is. Other information might be useful, but might also be confusing. The more information that is given in one go, the more danger there is of people being overwhelmed and unable to take it all in. The table on the next page lists some of the things that need to be considered when deciding what information should and should not be included with the appointment letter.

| Information | Why? | Why not? |
|---|---|---|
| A map of where the appointment is. | A map showing how to get around a building may help people who cannot easily ask for directions. | Most people find maps too difficult to use. Consider using photos of where people should go as this will be easier to understand and recognise. Good, clear signage will help every visitor find their way around a building – this will be more helpful than any accessible letter can hope to be. |
| Details about what will happen at the appointment. | This may help reduce anxiety about the appointment – not knowing what will happen can be extremely worrying for people. | If the information is hard to understand it may make people more anxious rather than less. |
| Details about what will happen after the appointment. | Knowing what will be done after the appointment may help people understand why the appointment is needed. | Unless exact timescales can be given, people may be anxious about waiting to be told what will happen. Information about what might happen may be misunderstood as being about what will happen. |

Complex and abstract ideas can be confusing. Consider whether the information can be made easier to understand by being simplified, or by explaining abstract ideas with examples of what they mean.

Example: measuring respect and dignity

Leeds Partnerships NHS Foundation Trust have been developing performance measures that will be based on service user feedback. One measure is that service users should feel they have been treated with respect and dignity by staff. The proposed method of gathering feedback was a single question included in an annual questionnaire. This would not be accessible for three key reasons:

Respect and dignity are difficult ideas. Many of the people who use the Learning Disability Service would find it hard to say whether they are treated with respect and dignity.

An annual survey would require people to think about a very long timescale. It may be hard for people to remember well what happened a year ago.

The survey would also require people to make a judgement of a number of different encounters with a number of different people. It may be hard for people to give an overall judgement such as this.

Staff and service users have worked together to develop meaningful ways of getting feedback. A list of behaviours showing respect and dignity was made. From this list, easier questions are being developed. Below is part of an explanation of respect based on this list:

We should be **polite** and **friendly** when we talk to people.
When we talk to people we should also **listen** to them.

We should give people chance to make **choices**.
When people make choices we should do what they want.
If we are unable to do what people want we must say why.

We should **ask** people if they think we are helping them right.
We should help people to **complain** if we keep helping them wrong.

Symbols, pictures, photographs

Images can be used to help people communicate and understand information. They can act as an alternative to written or spoken language, particularly in personalised communication systems. In information for mass communication it is unlikely that they will be used on their own, but when used with words they can aid understanding in a variety of ways, including:

- To help someone understand what they are reading
- To support reading a document with someone
- To provide visual focus for a discussion with someone

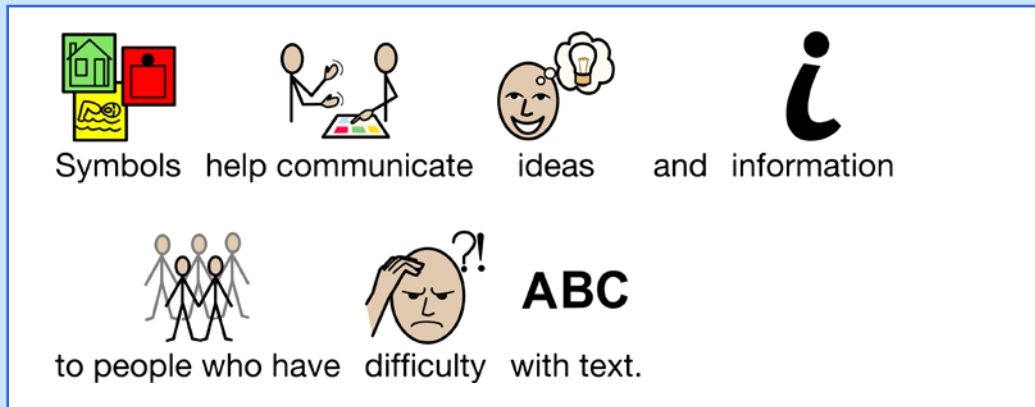
Broadly speaking, **symbols** are stylised representations of words and ideas. They are designed to be visually simple, often using stick figures.

Symbols are often part of a language that has rules for their grammar [eg. the use of an arrow pointing to the left to make the past tense of a symbol]. Symbol systems have usually been developed in conjunction with interventions to support communication. There are a number of different systems available. For example, the Widgit Symbol Set has developed as part of Widgit's work supporting the teaching of literacy. If symbol systems are available to you they are likely to be connected to software for using them. These packages may include their own guides to producing accessible information.

The meaning of some symbols will be transparent – easily recognised – while others will need to be learned. Those that need to be learned may be unhelpful – and possibly distracting – to people who are not familiar with them.

Example: Widgit Symbol System

The following example has been provided by Widgit. Try covering up the words and just looking at the symbols. What does the message seem to be?



You may have found that you can get an idea of the message of the sentence just from the symbols. Notice that not all words have a symbol. Widgit's symbol writing software allows you to choose which words to symbolise. There are symbols available for the other words in the sentence, but these are very abstract and need to be learned. Even very confident symbol readers will probably not use the more abstract symbols from a comprehensive system such as Widgit.

Symbolised support of reading such as this takes up a lot of space. If an entire document is being symbolised it will be important to keep the content as short as possible. One idea is to produce short, accessible summaries of each section of your document (the sentence above, for instance, could be used to give the main message of the 'symbols' section of this guide).

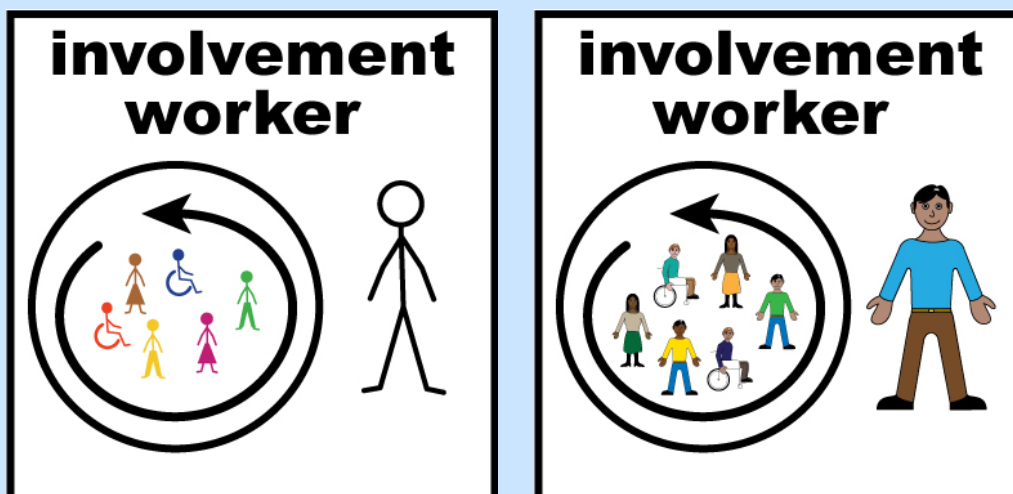
Widgit Symbols © Widgit Software 2010 www.widgit.com

As the example shows, some people use symbols to support reading individual words. More commonly in mass communication, a single symbol or other image is used to indicate the main subject of a sentence or short section of text. This is the main way **easy on the i** use images.

The division between **pictures** [images that are drawn] and symbols is not always clear-cut. Symbols for concrete objects will generally look like those objects, as will a picture of that object. Symbols are designed to show a single concept, while pictures may lend themselves to representing several ideas, more like illustrations. Because symbols are stylised, people may find it easier to understand that they represent a general idea, but they may find them harder to 'read'.

Example: an image for Involvement Worker

Compare the images below. The first is a symbol, the second is more pictorial, but still very symbolic:



Do you think the symbol shows the Involvement Worker's gender and race? For some people it may do – in particular gender, because we are used to seeing stick figures for 'male' and 'female' on toilet doors – but others will be able to understand it as generally symbolic of a person.

Some people will find the picture easier to 'understand' as it looks more like real life. It is however more specific about race and gender. This raises important issues of diversity, but also may be confusing to people if they encounter an involvement worker who does not look like this.

In both images there are several elements: the people encircled by an arrow, the circle around this, and the person standing beside this. Having multiple elements in an image makes it harder to understand, especially when some of those elements are quite abstract. Neither of these images are understandable without text. The overall design reflects other **easy on the i** images representing jobs within the Learning Disability Service, and the people encircled by an arrow is used in other images to represent the concepts of involvement and inclusion.

As with symbols, pictures can be used to indicate each of the main ideas in the text of a document. It is useful to think of the images as headings for each idea. Working in this way can also help you to break your information into smaller chunks, meaning that the way it is written will be easier to understand too.

Example:

What I want to say about my day service

This example is based on a short piece of work **easy on the i** did with someone to help her speak up for herself in a meeting about her day service provision. The information could be presented in the same style for mass communication (eg. a report on what people thought of day services). The person needed an easy summary of what she wanted to say, with images to help prompt her in support of her literacy.



I want to talk about my day service.
I like the physiotherapy sessions.
They help to keep me healthy.
I do not like the big group meetings.
They are too noisy.

The **day service** image conveys little of the information in the text. Below, images are used to support each separate idea.



I want to talk about my day service.



These are the things I think are **good** at the day service.



I like the **exercise sessions**.



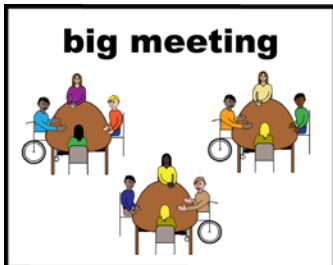
The exercise sessions help to keep me **healthy**.



These are the things I think are **bad** at the day service.



I do not like the **big meetings**.

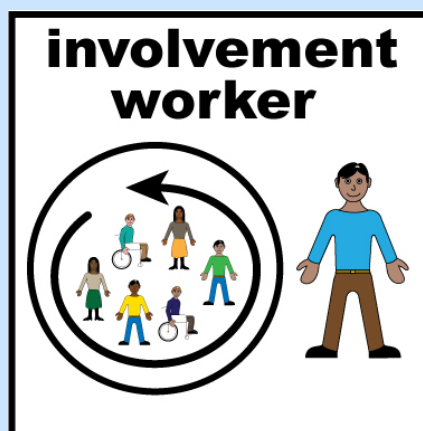
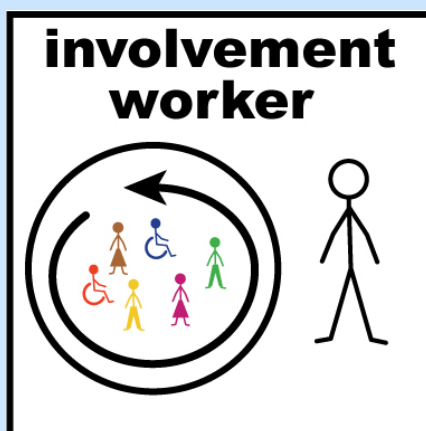


I find the big meetings too **noisy**.

In this example, the message is simple enough to be conveyed very well with just the images. Notice that the second section starts on the next page, rather than being broken across two. Although this takes up extra space, it keeps each section unified. It may be confusing for people to change page in the middle of a section as it feels as though there is a break.

Photographs are excellent at showing specific things. Some people may have difficulty understanding that a photograph is meant to be representative of a general idea. Photographs may also have lots of detail in the background or around the main subject of the image, making it harder to work out what they are being used to convey.

Example:
an Involvement Worker, or Thomas?



Which image is best? This depends on what it is being used for. Although Thomas is an Involvement Worker, the photo does not convey this at all. An explanation of the idea of an Involvement Worker would be better supported by one of the other images.

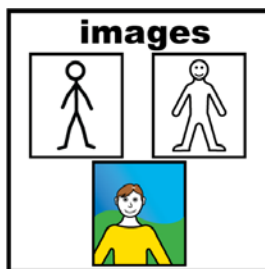
However, if you were sent a letter inviting you to meet with Thomas, the photo would help you know when you had found the right person. If you already knew Thomas, the photo would be a much more exact explanation of who had sent the letter than a symbol or photograph.

Whatever style you use, images can help make information easier to understand, but cannot work miracles. They can be extremely helpful to support reading, but generally cannot make complicated and abstract ideas easy.

Key Principles for producing accessible information

The following key principles set out well-established guidelines for making information accessible. The principles of **layout** and **lettering** are quite straightforward, and are mainly concerned with the appearance of your documents. Getting the **language** right is more difficult, but by taking care to use easy words, and if possible testing them with people with learning disabilities, you can increase the number of people that will understand your information.

Layout



Put images on the left hand side of the page. Because we read from left to right, the image is seen first, helping to indicate the subject of the text.

When using images to support text, think of the image like a title for that section of text. All of the sentences beside the image should be relevant to that image – and the image should be relevant to the text. If you have more than three or four sentences, ask yourself whether you need to use more images to break the idea down into more manageable chunks, or whether you can give the important information in fewer sentences.

Writing should be lined up along the left-hand side. It should not be justified [made to line up along the right as well] as this will change the spacing of the words.

This text is lined up along the right, meaning each line starts in a different place.

This makes it harder to find the start of each new line.

This text is justified, meaning the spaces are stretched to fill the whole line.

This can make it harder to move from one word to the next.

Documents should not be cramped. Breaking information up into sections – possibly with boxes or headings – makes it easier for people to deal with one section at a time. Lists and bullet points are easier to understand than a series of options listed in a sentence. Wherever possible, sections should start and end on the same page – and sentences should never be broken between pages.

When breaking up information, think carefully about the order in which it will be presented. All information on a single subject should be grouped together. Using headings when drafting information can help this, even if the headings are not included in the final document.

Example: What is Swine Flu? leaflet

This is the inside of a leaflet that **easy on the i** designed for NHS Leeds to explain swine flu (it was originally printed as an A4 page folded in half, and so would have been larger and clearer than this). The information was broken down into four main sections.

What is swine flu?

ill
Swine Flu can make you feel very ill. Most people feel ill for about 1 week. If you get swine flu, you may feel like this

headaches
sneezing
vomiting
diarrhoea
fever
cough
sore throat
aching muscles

How do you get swine flu?

sneeze
People with swine flu can give it to others. This can happen when people cough and sneeze.

How to look after yourself

use tissue
When you cough or sneeze cover your nose and mouth with a tissue.

bin it
put the tissue in the bin
and
wash hands
wash your hands.

The first section gives the simple explanation that swine flu is an illness, with an indication of the likely severity. As there was extensive media coverage of swine flu, this explanation was designed to acknowledge that the illness is serious while avoiding being alarmist.

The second section lists possible symptoms of swine flu. As a series of items, this is better represented by a list rather than in full sentences. The bold images help explain the words used.

In standard information, the information in the third section would often be included with the initial explanation of swine flu. Separating the information about how the illness is transmitted made the initial explanation clearer, and placing the sections on how the disease is transmitted, and how this can be prevented, makes the link between the two more apparent.

The back page of the leaflet gave the advice to stay in bed and contact a doctor if showing symptoms of swine flu, followed by contact details for getting further information. This information would be more abstract if it was read before finding out what the possible symptoms are.

Lettering

The lettering of the text should be easy to read. Most people find black writing on a white background easiest to read. Some people prefer black on yellow.

Compare the following styles:

Easy to read? **Easy to read?** Easy to read? Easy to read?

It is important to use simple, plain styles of lettering. Use lettering that does not have serifs ('little hats'):

With serifs Without serifs

This document is written in Arial. Other easy-to-read styles include Tahoma and Verdana.

The size of the letters is also important. 14-point (like this text) is recommended as the smallest size to use. Some people prefer even larger letters.

This is 16-point. This is 18-point. This is 20-point.

Avoid using *italics*, underlining, and CAPITALS as people may use the shape of the word to help them read. **Bold** can be used to emphasise words – but remember that people may not notice that the word is emphasised, so your sentences should be understandable without it. Write numbers as numerals rather than words: **10** instead of **ten**, for example.

Language

When writing accessible information, try to use everyday words. It can be helpful to read your text aloud – if it feels awkward to say, it is probably hard to read. Avoid using long words and jargon words that people are less likely to understand. Simple explanations should be given of difficult words and ideas – this could be a sentence explaining the word, or some concrete examples of what an abstract idea might mean.

Be aware that some words and phrases might seem easy, but are actually quite confusing if someone is not familiar with them. Here are just a few examples, all of which have been edited out of recent **easy on the i** documents and presentations:

Get in touch

Although many people will understand this, it is confusing for those who do not. Saying **contact** will be clearer, or – even better – being specific about how people can contact you.

Good practice

People may understand **practice** to mean ‘doing something lots of times to get better’. It would be better to use a phrase like **getting things right**.

Rule of thumb

People may not know the phrase, but some may also find the **idea** difficult – they may want more certainty than the ‘usually’ or ‘roughly’ that **rule of thumb** implies.

Beware also of jargon and abbreviations that people in a particular job use all the time but other people do not understand at all.

Sentences should have a single message. A useful guide is to avoid sentences of more than twenty words – fifteen if possible. If a sentence uses a comma, it might be better split into two.

Keep your writing as clear and direct as possible. Address the reader as “you”. If your text includes information about a group of people to which your reader belongs, it may be helpful to use “you” instead of referring to the whole group.

Example:
making text clearer and more direct

People who have difficulty getting into the building can have assistance arranged.

This is more clearly an instruction if addressed to the reader:

If you have difficulty getting into the building you can tell us and we will arrange help.

It can be made easier to understand if broken into two sentences and made more direct:

We can help you if you have difficulty getting into the building.
Tell us if you need this help.

The language is clearer, but how easy is the message to understand? Will people know if they will have difficulty getting into the building? How should they communicate this – and to who? Specifying what the difficulties are with access will allow people to decide if they need help. Giving a phone number will make it clear that this is how to make contact (although not everyone will want to use the phone).

The ideas and examples in this guide have hopefully shown you ways to make information easier to understand. None of the ideas will make something that is really complex suddenly become really simple, but they can make simple ideas more accessible. Decide what it is important for people to know and possible for them to understand, and work in partnership with people with learning disabilities to make that as accessible as possible.

easy on the i
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www.leedspft.nhs.uk/our_services/ld/sui/eoti



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LDS
Learning Disability Service