Widgit

Guide to Good Symbol Content

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Widgit

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Contents

1 About symbols

1.1 What are symbols?

Symbols are used all around us in everyday life as a simple and direct way of communicating. Whether a sign at a foreign airport or a set of instructions for how to use a new appliance, the use of symbols has an instant impact on how we understand and interpret information.

In the 1980s, the idea of using symbols to support written text in education technology was established.

Widgit extended the idea of symbol 'language' through the creation of the Widgit Symbol Set, an extensive set of symbols that could illustrate words and concepts. The Widgit Symbol Set provides a way to effectively 'translate' written text into a simple and easy to understand form for struggling readers. This symbol set was the first of its kind to support written information, and has grown and developed greatly since it was first created.

1.2 Widgit Symbols
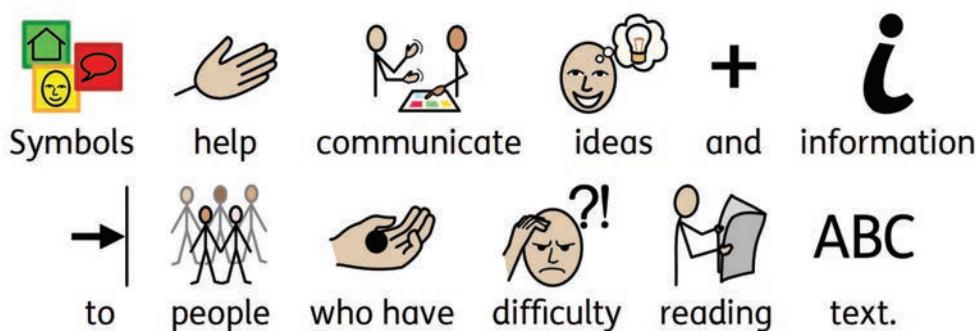
The ever expanding Widgit Symbol Set contains more than 20,000 symbols, which cover an English vocabulary of over 55,000 words.

Widgit's simply drawn, colourful symbols each illustrate a single concept, in a clear and concise way, and cover a range of topics (including many curricular areas) wide enough to make them suitable for symbol users of all ages and abilities.

Widgit Symbols are used all over the world, supporting 17 languages, increasing the accessibility of written text, giving readers of all literacy levels greater access to information.

As the Widgit Symbol Set is designed specifically for written information, Widgit Symbol users can develop a real independence in their reading and writing.

2 Symbol structure

2.1 Schematic structure

The Widgit Symbols follow a schematic structure, meaning that there are 'rules' for the way in which they are formed. These 'rules' for symbol composition quickly become recognisable to new users, giving a level of independence in learning the conventions within the symbols.

A good example of this structure is the set of conventions followed by the symbols for buildings. A symbol that represents a building will feature a standard outline of a building, which contains another symbol that gives information about the type of building it is. The scale of the building is indicated by the shape of the roof: a flat roof represents a large building, such as a hospital, and a pointed roof represents a smaller building, such as a clinic.
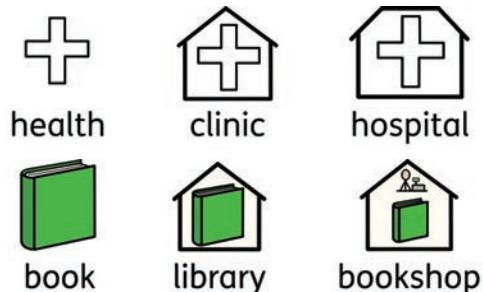
The inclusion of other elements within a 'building' symbol can change the nature of the symbol again. For example, adding a cash register to the 'book in a building' symbol would indicate a bookshop rather than a library.

Once these rules have been learned, it is easy to recognise the concept being depicted by the symbol, even when the symbol features three or more elements.

2.2 Levels of symbols

There are three levels of complexity within the Widgit Symbol Set: **Transparent, Learned** and **Abstract**.

■ **Transparent**
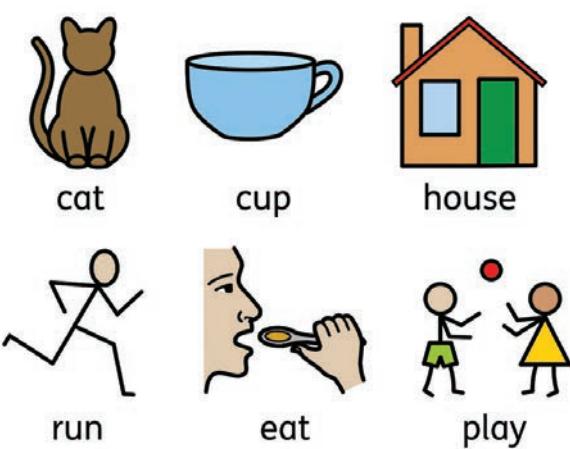
'Transparent' symbols are very obvious depictions of the concepts that they illustrate.

The reader does not need to rely upon the symbol's context (i.e. to understand any of the words in the sentence, or pay attention to the other symbols) to be able to understand what the symbol means. As long as the reader is familiar with the concept that is being illustrated, they should be able to interpret the symbol.

■ Learned

in   on   under   behind
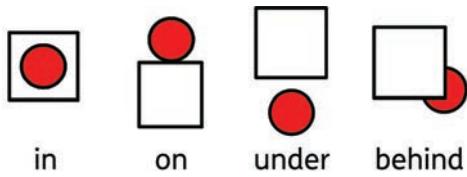
The second level of symbol, 'learned', is more conceptual and therefore needs to be learned. The consistent nature of 'learned' symbols means that the concepts they represent become obvious when they are shown together.

In this example, the concepts of the words are illustrated by the varying relationship between the red ball and the box. If the 'in' symbol was seen without the word or the other symbols to provide context, it could be difficult to understand. However, having seen the symbols for related concepts, the reader is able to make an educated guess at the meaning, even without being able to understand the words.

■ Abstract

the   a   if   of   as

At the third and highest level are the 'abstract' symbols. Abstracts are symbols that have no obvious meaning when viewed on their own, and typically represent determiners (e.g. a, an, the) or adpositions (e.g. of, to, with).

While their meaning can often be inferred by the context in which they are used, abstracts may actually be a distraction to some readers.

In fact, not using abstract symbols to symbolise, for example, a determiner in a sentence, can actually help the meaning of the sentence to become more obvious. Generally, it is recommended that you do not use abstract symbols unless they are requested, or they fall into one of the following two circumstances:

1) If you are writing for a symbol reader who is learning the first 100 words*, then you would have the abstract symbols accompany words such as 'the' to enable the reader to identify the word.

2) In some schools, where students have more profound needs, every word may be symbolised so that the students know that they are not missing any of the meaning in the text.

*First 100 high frequency words, Letters and Sounds, Primary National Strategy.

It is not always necessary to symbolise every word in a sentence in order to convey the sentence's meaning.

2.3 Qualifiers

Qualifiers are grammatical markers that appear as part of the symbol when you are using a word that is superlative or comparative, past or future tense, or plural.

■ Comparatives and superlatives
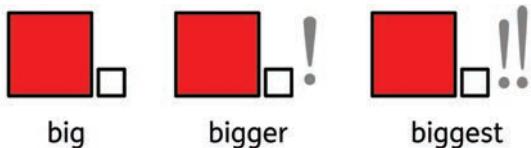
Comparatives are always denoted by a single grey exclamation mark next to the symbol; two grey exclamation marks indicate a superlative.

This example shows the comparative and superlative of the word 'big'.

> **?!** Superlatives and comparatives should always be indicated by using these qualifiers, regardless of the level you are writing for.

■ Tense markers
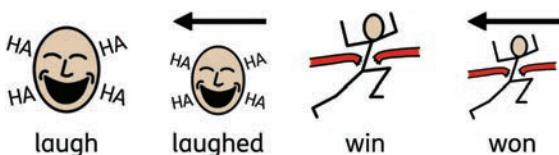
They are used to indicate that the concept being illustrated happened in the past, rather than the present.

Forward tense markers are also used in some languages; for example, the English word 'will'.

Past tense markers are arrows that sit above the symbol and literally 'point' to the past.

> **?!** Tense qualifiers are intended for higher level symbol use and are not usually necessary in basic level symbol reading.

■ Plurals
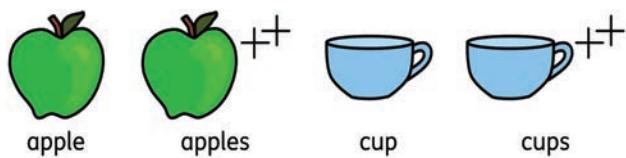
the symbol next to the main graphic. The 'double plus' indicates that there are multiples of the concept that is being illustrated.

Pluralised concepts are represented by a 'double plus' qualifier being included in

> **?!** Generally, it is better not to use plural markers, as they can distract some readers from the concept being illustrated. Plurals are only really needed when speaking specifically of plural items in comparison to singular.

3 Choosing the most appropriate way to symbolise your content

There are a number of different methods you can use to provide symbol support for your content.

The methods that you choose will depend on the level of symbol support that your content requires. This guide focuses on four of the most popular methods. These methods are discussed in detail in *3.1 The different methods of symbolising*

- **Key symbols**
  One or two symbols per concept which can be used to convey a simple message

- **Symbol highlight**
  Three to six symbols which illustrate the basic message of a passage of text

- **Symbol summary**
  Up to four symbol sentences that can support text by illustrating a summary of its basic messages

- **Fully symbolised content**
  Providing a symbol for every information carrying word within the content

In order to determine the level of support your content needs, and therefore choose the most appropriate method with which to symbolise your content, there are three factors you will need to consider first.

One of these factors may be more influential than the others in terms of determining the method of symbolising you choose, depending on the circumstances surrounding your content.

These factors will be discussed in more detail in *3.2 How to choose the right method of symbolising.*

- **What do you want to write?**
  Are you writing your content from scratch, or providing symbol support for existing content?

- **Who will read your content?**
  Will it be read exclusively by symbol readers (i.e. struggling and emerging readers), or by readers of all literacy levels?

- **How will your content be available?**
  In what media will your content be available? Will this limit your layout in terms of space?

3.1   The different methods of symbolising

There are four different methods of symbolising, each providing a different level of support.

As described in *3.2 How to choose the right method of symbolising*, there are different factors that will affect the method you choose.

The main factor is deciding who your content is aimed at and who will be reading it, i.e. will your content need to be accessible to readers of all literacy levels (i.e. symbol readers and non-symbol readers), or will it only be read by symbol readers?

There are three methods for providing inclusive symbolisation:

> **Key symbols**
> **Symbol highlight**
> **Symbol summary**

If your content is aimed solely at symbol readers, you will very probably want to **fully symbolise** your content.

Key symbols

■ What are key symbols?

Key symbols are simply one or two symbols that can be used with or without text to convey a single piece of information. At most, they provide the same amount of information as a short sentence of text.

They can help reinforce meaning and give reassurance by acting as reminders for any level of reader.

■ Where would key symbols be used?

Signage - Key symbols are particularly effective when used in signage. Wayfinding signage typically communicates a single 'sentence', for example 'the swimming pool is this way'. Even though this sentence may not actually feature on the sign, key symbols provide the ideal amount of information to support the message on the sign, increasing accessibility.

Symbol signage

Widgit have produced symbol signage at South Woodham Ferrers Leisure Centre to make wayfinding accessible to visitors with varying literacy levels.

Key symbols in a document

The use of key symbols is a very useful tool for communicating with people for whom English is not a primary language, or those who do not speak any English. The inclusion of symbols within documents, such as the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust's A&E Communication Passport, can effectively aid the communication of a concept in a way that is simple and easy to understand, reducing reliance on text.

The A&E Communication Passport was developed to help hospital staff communicate with patients with learning impairments, and those for whom English is not a primary language.

By using key symbols for each question they need to ask, hospital staff are able to communicate the theme of a question to patients who would have had difficulty in understanding the written text, and therefore gain an understanding of their situation and their needs.

Documents - When using key symbols within an inclusive document, each key symbol will support one piece of information, i.e. a concept within the document's text, such as the elements of contact information.
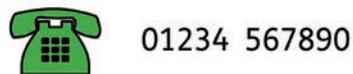
When key symbols are used alongside a body of text or whole sentence, the symbols only indicate the subject. Symbol readers can best access these documents when assisted by a non-symbol reader who can help them understand the message indicated by the key symbols.

Flashcards - Key symbols work really well in sequencing and timetabling activities. Key symbols can be particularly effective when used on flashcards displaying a series of events, with one symbol representing each event within the sequence. A child who might not be able to read and understand a complex timetable could use a series of flashcards which each feature a key symbol as a reference to know what they will be doing during the day.

Symbol highlights

■ What are symbol highlights?

A symbol highlight consists of three to six symbols which communicate the basic message of a passage of text. A highlight communicates the same amount of information as a newspaper article headline, in that it provides a very basic summary of the main message within the content, as a headline would for an article.

Providing symbol support with highlights allows a reader who struggles with text to take more information from a passage of text than key symbols would provide. Key symbols only communicate a very simple, single message. However, a highlight provides enough symbol support for the basic message of the text to be understood.

■ Where would symbol highlights be used?

Information displays - Symbol highlights work especially well on information panels and as part of display information.

Documents - As symbol highlights provide just the key message of a passage of text, they can also act as an effective tool for skim-reading. Including a highlight makes the document more accessible to struggling readers, who can use the symbols to understand the main message of the text.

Symbol highlights are particularly effective in printed documents where space is limited, as they provide a degree of symbol support without taking up too much space or dramatically affecting the layout of the document.
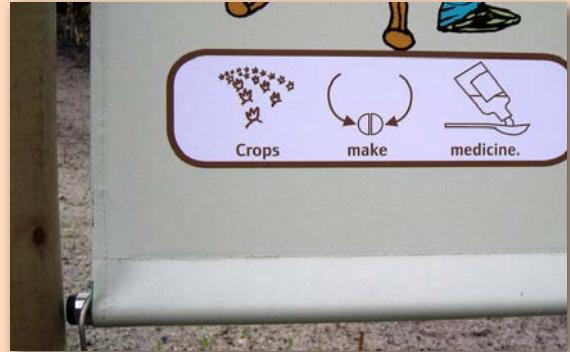
Symbol highlights on signs

Symbol highlights are used on signs at the Eden Project in Cornwall, which is accessed by visitors with varying levels of understanding of written English. These highlights are used to support blocks of text on displays around the site, helping visitors who struggle with written English to understand the main message of the text.

Symbol highlights in a leaflet

Symbol highlights were used in a leaflet created by Witley Court and Gardens. The inclusion of a symbol highlight in the middle of each page allowed struggling readers to understand the main message, without the symbol support intruding for more confident readers.

Symbol highlights were used in an Easy Read version of 'What next in Solihull?', a booklet produced by Solihull Borough Council for young people in the area with learning disabilities, their parents, carers and professionals, containing information on choices available after leaving school.

This was an inclusive document which could be accessed by young people who may struggle with written text, and by adults who are likely to be non-symbol readers. Therefore, the symbol support needed to be prominent enough to give struggling readers the chance to understand the main messages of the text, without being distracting for readers who do not need this extra support.

Symbol summary

Summaries on a website

The International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC) have added symbol summaries to each page of their website, allowing symbol readers to see the main message of the content without altering the text.

■ What are symbol summaries?

A symbol summary consists of up to four fully symbolised sentences that explain all or part of a document.

A symbol summary is an ideal way of providing symbol support for a document which will need to be accessed by both symbol readers and non-symbol readers, allowing symbol readers to understand the content's main messages without altering the body of the text.

■ Where would a symbol summary be used?

Websites - Due to symbol summaries taking up more space than key symbols and symbol highlights, they are particularly appropriate at providing symbol support to web content, where space is likely to be less limited than in printed documents.

Symbol summaries also work very well in virtual learning environments (VLEs) which are accessed by both pupils who are able readers and pupils who need an extra 'helping hand' in understanding written text. By adding a symbol summary to a page of content within a VLE, students who would otherwise struggle to read the text on the page are able to understand the content's main messages without having to rely upon help, giving a sense of independence.
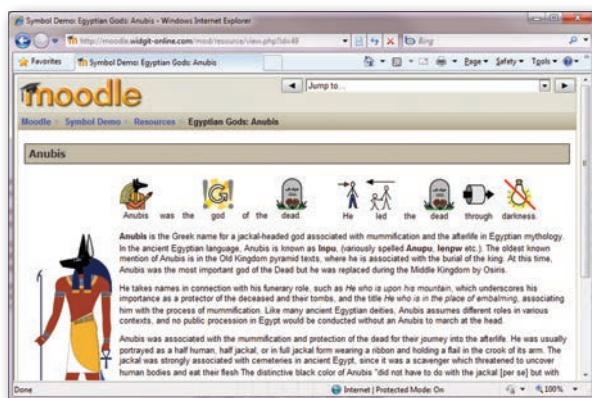
Documents - Including a symbol summary is the ideal way to provide symbol support for existing text that cannot be simplified or altered due to the original text needing to remain in its entirety, such as a document that is intended to be an inclusive document for a wider audience, rather than exclusively for symbol readers or for non-symbol readers, or content that contains legal or other important information that cannot be reworded.

Summaries in a document

Symbol summaries were used in a document produced by Power Employment explaining how the organisation would be using personal information in relation to the Data Protection Act.
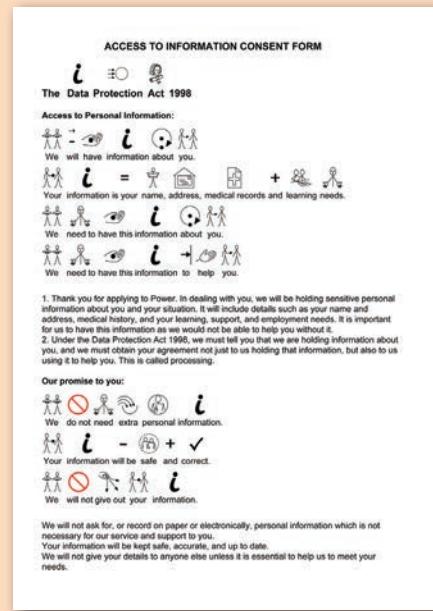
As this information needed to be accessible to readers of all literacy levels, symbol summaries were used to enable less confident readers to understand the main messages. The simply written sentences within the symbol summaries are separate from the unsymbolised text, meaning that this unsymbolised text did not need to be reworded.

Symbol content on a website

The Widgit symbol users news / stories website (**www.symbolworld. org**) is a fully symbolised website with symbol support added to all of its simply written content. The website was designed especially for symbol users, giving struggling and emerging readers the opportunity to keep up to date with the news and what's going on in their local area without having to ask for help with the text.

Symbol content surveys

Ofsted have developed a wide range of symbolised surveys to use with their department for looked after children. Full symbol support allows the children to independently respond to Ofsted's questions, without the need for their carers to act as interpreters.

Fully symbolised content

■ **What is fully symbolised content?**

If the content you are symbolising is aimed exclusively at symbol readers, you will very probably want to give full symbol support to your text.

Full symbolisation involves illustrating every information-carrying word in the content with a symbol.

■ **Where would fully symbolised content be used?**

Full symbolisation is definitely appropriate for any content that is aimed exclusively at symbol readers, as it allows them to gain the near 'word for word' understanding, which a brief summary cannot.

It is important to remember that while fully symbolised documents are the most accessible for symbol readers, you will need to write or rewrite text specifically to be symbolised.

Space is another important consideration with a fully symbolised document. A single page of A4 text, when simplified and symbolised, usually takes up to three or four sides of A4.

3.2 How to choose the right method of symbolising

Now you are familiar with the four different methods of symbolising, there are a few factors you will need to consider in order to determine which method would be most appropriate in providing symbol support to your content.

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■ Who will read your content?

It is important to be clear about who your content needs to be accessible to before choosing the method with which you will provide your symbol support. You may be looking to increase the accessibility of existing content (e.g. a letter, a legal document, a story) by adding symbol support in order for the content to be accessible to readers of varying levels of literacy.

If your content needs to be fully accessible to readers of all literacy levels (i.e. symbol readers and non-symbol readers), you can choose from **key symbols**, **symbol highlights**, and **symbol summaries**, depending on the level of symbol support you want to provide.

If your content is aimed primarily at symbol readers, **fully symbolised content** would be most appropriate.

■ How will your content be available?

It is important to consider the way in which your content will be presented. For example, will your content be presented as a written document, such as a leaflet or letter, as a sign on the wall or as content on a website?

If you are creating a standard leaflet (e.g. a sheet of A4 folded into three), you may not have enough space for fully symbolised content. Consider using symbol highlights or a symbol summary

in conjuction with the original text, or producing a separate fully symbolised document.

If you are creating a sign to guide people around a building, space will be at an absolute premium and, along with simple text for non-symbol readers if necessary, only key symbols should normally be used.

If you are writing symbolised text for a website, the space you have to work with is likely to be much more flexible, meaning that you will be less restricted.

> **Symbolised text takes up a lot more space than non-symbolised text. The way your content is presented will restrict the space that you have to work with, and therefore how many symbols you are able to fit in.**

■ What do you want to write?

If you are creating symbol-supported content, as with any writing, it's important to have a clear idea of exactly what it is that you want to say before you begin.

When you are writing text that will be symbolised, it is essential that your sentences are as short and simple as possible, and that they are written in very plain and simple language.

This is discussed in detail in section *4.3 Creating symbol summaries and fully symbolised content*.

When you have a good idea of what you want to say and how best to say it in plain English, you can choose which methods of symbolising will be the most appropriate.

4 Creating your symbolised content

Let's look at how to add symbol support to content using each of the four methods of symbolising, as discussed in section *3.1 The different methods of symbolising*.

4.1 Creating key symbols

Identify key concepts

When using key symbols, the first step is to identify the key concepts of the information that you want to illustrate. If one or two symbols will not be enough to communicate this information, you may need to use a more detailed method of symbolising, such as using a symbol highlight or symbol summary.

Key symbols can often be used to replace text entirely. For example, on a sign for wayfinding, the basic message might be 'The lift is this way', although this explicit message would not appear in text on the sign.

To communicate this message effectively, a symbol could be used to represent where the sign reader is being directed to, with an arrow indicating the

direction to travel in. The arrow would therefore illustrate the 'is this way' element of the message without the need for text.
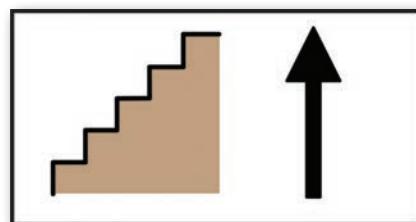
("The stairs are this way")
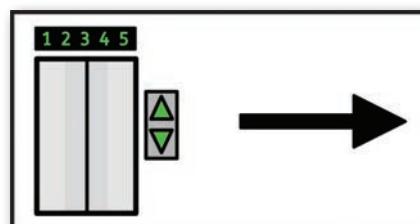
("The lift is this way")

Key symbol examples

Used alongside braille in playpark signage

School door signs depicting room activities

Decide upon a suitable symbol to represent each concept

In order to communicate as much information as possible, it is essential that the key symbols you choose are as specific as possible to the text that they support. This may involve using symbols that would normally illustrate different concepts from those which you are communicating.

At South Woodham Ferrers Leisure Centre, the symbols used to illustrate each gymnasium represent the sport activity that takes place within each room, rather than using the symbol for 'gym' each time. These symbols, along with the accompanying arrows, give a clear message to all visitors familiar with the leisure centre. They offer greater, more specific information than could have been communicated by using the 'gym' symbol to represent both gymnasiums. As the signs also feature the name of the room/place in text, any misunderstanding of these symbols by non-symbol readers is avoided, and a symbol reader would be able to ask an non-symbol reader for reassurance on their interpretation of the signs meaning.

Please see the *'Meaning'* section in *4.4 Symbolising your content* for detail on how to choose the right symbol.

Using key symbols within a document

When using key symbols within documents, it is important to remember that key symbols will only illustrate one simple piece of information.

Each symbol will be able to provide a prompt for messages within the content, which could then be explained and expanded upon by an non-symbol reader.

4.2   Creating a symbol highlight

The purpose of a symbol highlight is to increase the accessibility of a section of text by communicating its main point to people who struggle with reading, using as few concepts as possible. There is a simple process for creating this symbol support:

1) Think of a 'headline' that will communicate the very basic message of the text you want to add symbol support to.

A symbol highlight communicates about the same amount of information as a headline would about an article in a newspaper. The first step in creating a symbol highlight is to think of a 'headline' style sentence that communicates, in plain English, the basic message of the text you are giving symbol support to. A good place to start is to think, if you could only pass on one important piece of information to the reader, what would it be?

West Africa

The chop farm

The first stage of forest land clearance for farming.

Light-loving crops are grown to eat and sell alongside useful trees such as pawpaw and mango.

The maize, ground nuts, cow peas, yams and cassava provide the eight essential amino acids which are vital for a balanced diet and good health.

Cassava   Ground nuts   Maize

'These crops are healthy and help with a balanced diet'
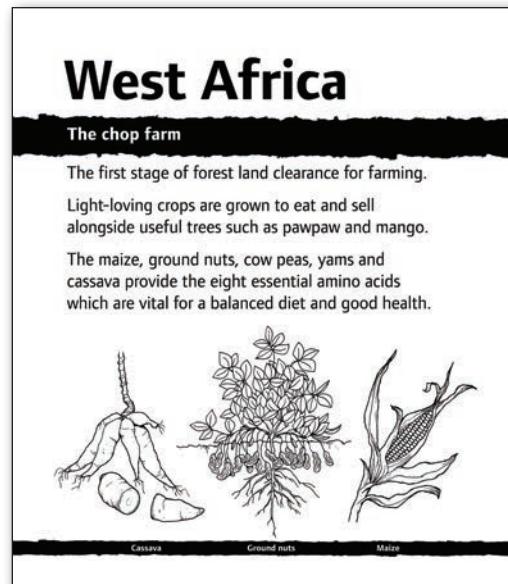
2) Choose three to six symbols which could convey your 'headline' in the most simple way possible.

Symbol highlights usually consist of a very short and simple sentence, with a 'subject verb object' formula as a minimum, which is symbolised using 'transparent' symbols (see **2.1 Levels of symbols**).

In order to choose the most appropriate symbols for your highlight, you need to think of the message the symbols illustrate as if it were a 'formula'. Thinking of the message in this way will ensure that the symbols convey an easily understood process.
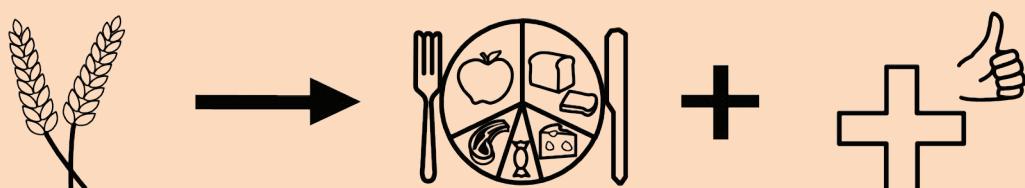
It is important to think of the symbols as being independent of the text they support at this stage. Once you have chosen the symbols for your 'formula', you can decide on the most simple way to express the message in words.

There are detailed guidelines on choosing the right symbols to illustrate your message in the *'Meaning'* section of *4.4 Symbolising your content*.

Plants   get energy from   the sun

Crops   make   medicine.
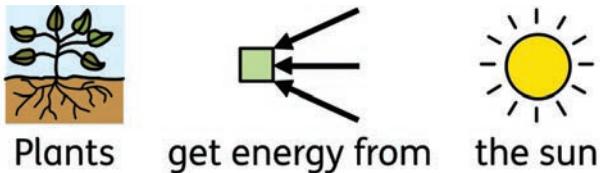
On the Eden Project information display, the symbol highlight sentence reads 'crops make medicine', rather than 'medicine is made from crops'. Highlights should use the most simple and concise terms possible, presented in the most clear and logical order.

3) Change the text of your 'headline' to fit the symbols.

When your symbol 'formula' is ready, think about how to phrase its message in words in the most simple way you can, to create text to display with the highlight symbols.

It is best if the order of the words in this sentence form a simple process (e.g.

'a and b make c'), which may mean rewording your original headline.

It is important to remember that this sentence does not need to have been taken directly from the text that the symbol support is being added to; the symbol highlight 'stands alone' as a message about the text's content.

These crops   help with a   balanced diet   and   good health

4.3 Creating symbol summaries and fully symbolised content

If you are creating fully symbolised content or adding a symbol summary, rather than adding symbol support to existing text with key symbols or symbol highlights, you will very probably need to reword whatever text you have before symbolising it.

■ Symbol summaries

If you choose to provide symbol support for your content by creating a symbol summary, the first step is to decide upon the main pieces of information in the content that you would like to be included in the summary.

A good way to do this is to separate the text into sections. Generally speaking, up to three paragraphs of original text would include the amount of information that could be symbolised within a symbol summary. If your original content is more than three paragraphs long, you may need to use more than one symbol summary. For each section, make a bulleted list of information that you would like to include in the symbol summary.

Once you have made your bulleted list, you will need to write one to two simple sentences which express this information.

A symbol summary can be up to to four lines long, so if your summary is longer than this, you may want to review how essential each piece of information you are including is, or split this summary into two summaries and include the second later in the document.

You will then have your summary sentence ready to symbolise. There is more information on how to do this in the next section.

Writing content to be symbolised

■ Simple language

Whether you are creating content that is fully symbolised throughout, or creating a symbol summary as part of an inclusive document, it is vital to be aware of the importance of simple language.

As a general rule, the more clear and concise your language is, the easier it will be for people to understand. This is especially true when symbolising text.

To ensure that your content is as simply written as possible, begin by deciding exactly what it is that you want to say.

Talking aloud is a good first step, as people tend to speak in more simple terms than they write. When you begin writing, use short sentences in plain language.

This is particularly applicable when symbolising existing text that needs to be simplified before you can add symbols. A paragraph of text can be very descriptive and emotive. It may include a lot of words that are not actually information carriers, and others that may be unfamiliar to your audience.

■ **Simple language example:**

If you wanted to symbolise the text:

'Today I went to the shops. It was a very pleasant walk with the sun shining, and the birds singing in the trees. Along the way, I bumped into an old friend who greeted me warmly. We chatted for a while and reminisced about old times.'

1. First, you need to extract each key piece of information that is being given to the reader and make a list in very plain English. When doing this, it is important to ensure that you omit all non-information carriers and replace all words that may be unfamiliar to your audience with terms that they are more likely to understand:

   ■ Went to the shops today
   ■ Sun shining
   ■ Birds singing
   ■ Met friend
   ■ Talked to friend about the past

Non-information carriers can very easily be omitted without changing the meaning or purpose of the content.

2. The next stage is to create sentences from this list, using simple language and structure. The sentences should include all of the words necessary to illustrate the concepts, but not be overcrowded with words that do not carry information. The aim of this 'rewriting' process is to convert your original text into a simpler, easier to read form:

   I went to the shops today.
   The sun was shining.
   The birds were singing in the trees.
   I met a friend.
   We talked about the past.

By extracting the key information from your content, and then rewriting each piece of information in plain language, you can ensure that your content is ready to be symbolised.

4.4 Symbolising your content

No matter what method of symbolising you are using, it's important to ensure that the symbols you choose accurately represent what it is that you want to say.

■ Meaning

When creating symbol-supported content, it is important to remember that a word can have more than one meaning, and that there are different symbols to represent each of those meanings.

If you are using Widgit software to symbolise content, you will be offered alternative symbols for terms with more than one meaning, giving you the opportunity to select the most appropriate symbol to accurately represent the concept.

Changing the symbol for a particular word can alter, and often completely change, the meaning of the entire sentence for a symbol reader. It is important to think about the concept a word represents in a sentence rather than the word itself. Sometimes using a symbol that illustrates another word, and then retyping the text beneath the symbol, can provide a more appropriate illustration of a concept, as you can see in the following example:
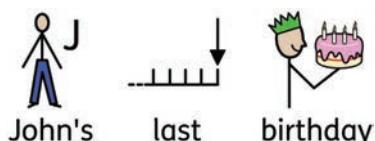

In the sentence 'John's last birthday', the birthday being referred to is John's most recent birthday, not his final birthday – i.e. the last birthday he ever had. However, the symbol chosen to illustrate 'last' in this example gives the impression that it was John's final, rather than his previous birthday.
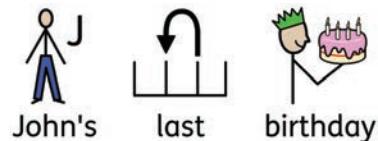

Here, the symbol for 'last' has been replaced with the symbol for 'previous', showing the correct meaning of the word.

Sometimes the differences in meaning that a word can have are very subtle, but choosing an inappropriate symbol can make them very obvious.

If you wanted to say, 'I work in the garden', you could use the 'manual work' work symbol to symbolise 'I work', as working in the garden is primarily a physical activity.

However, if you were talking about taking some paperwork outside to complete whilst you sat in the garden, the 'man at a desk' symbol would be more appropriate as it would best represent the type of work that you would be doing.
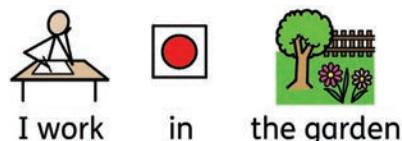

It is important to remember that some words may not have all the appropriate symbols matched to them within the Widgit Symbol Database. Therefore, if you can't find a symbol in the list of alternatives that accurately represents the word you want to symbolise, you may wish to brainstorm related concepts and then retext this word to the word you want to symbolise.

■ Replacing and combining text

To help you find and use the most appropriate symbol for the word or concept you are illustrating, all Widgit software gives you the option of 'retexting' a symbol. Retexting is a way of customising a Widgit Symbol by replacing the text underneath the symbol with new text.

For example, when writing about a dog called 'Sam', the symbol for the name of a man beginning with S (the automatically generated symbol for the word 'Sam') is not appropriate; the most appropriate symbol would be the symbol for 'dog'. In order to use this symbol instead, the word 'dog' would need to be typed rather than 'Sam', and then the text beneath the symbol for 'dog' retexted to 'Sam'.

Sam   likes   bones

Sam   likes   bones
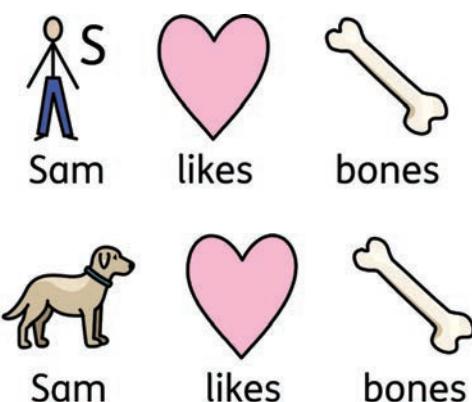
Another reason for retexting is when it would be best to combine two or more words in a sentence under a single symbol.

For most symbol readers, this sentence may be hard to understand:

I   went   to   the   shops
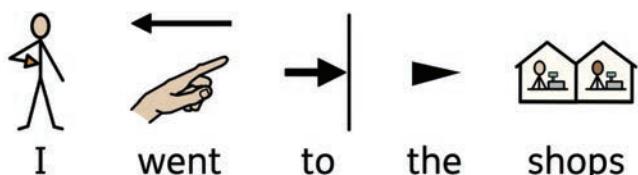
By removing the abstract symbols above 'to' and 'the' and retexting those words by combining them with the text beneath the symbol for the concept they are most closely related to, the meaning of the sentence becomes much more obvious.

I   went to   the shops
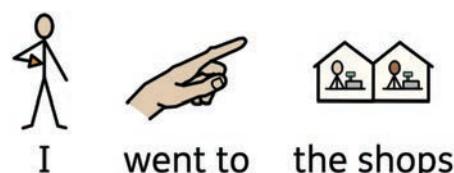
When writing for symbol readers, it is important to only include what is necessary to make content as simple as possible.

If space is restricted in your document, you may also wish to retext some of your symbolised words in order for them to take up less space. Don't forget that it is important that a symbolised sentence is no longer than one line in order for it to be as easy as possible for the reader to understand. If you are having difficulty in fitting your symbolised sentence onto one line, retexting can offer a solution.

# ■ Retexting in Widgit programs

Change Symbol Text

In **InPrint 3** and **SymWriter 2**, you can retext symbols by clicking in the word to be changed and pressing the **F11 key** or clicking the **retext button**.

In **Widgit Online**, you can retext symbols by clicking in the word to be changed and pressing the **Alt + F11 key** or clicking the **retext button**.

■ Consistency

One of the most important elements of good symbol support is consistency.

When you have chosen the appropriate symbols to effectively illustrate the concepts behind your text, it is best to continue to use the same symbols for those concepts every time that they are referred to within the text.

My new car is red
It goes very fast
It is always breaking down
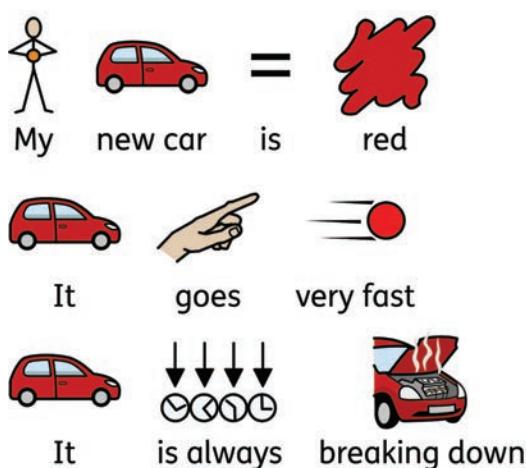
In the consecutive sentences above, 'it' refers to an object ('my new car'). By replacing the symbol for the pronoun 'it' with the symbol for the object that it refers to, as defined in the first sentence, it is much easier for the symbol reader to understand that this object is still the topic of conversation.

As well as ensuring that the way you symbolise a concept is consistent throughout your content, it is also very important to ensure that the symbols you choose are consistent with each other. Symbols illustrating words which have an antonym (e.g. hard and soft, light and dark, rough and smooth) will very often have a directly corresponding symbol for their antonym 'counterpart'. Using this pair of symbols together where possible will prevent confusion and reinforce their meaning.

Some pairs of antonyms will have more than one pair of symbols that could be used to illustrate them, depending on their context.

top   bottom
top   bottom
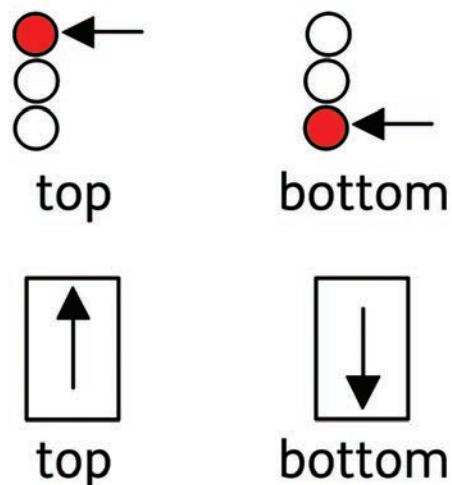
Here, the first pair of symbols suggests an item at the top of a stack, whereas the second pair suggests the top or bottom of an item.

■ Consistency example:

Consider the following sentences:

'Put the light boxes on the top shelf.'

'Put the heavy boxes on the bottom shelf.'

By being consistent and using the corresponding symbol pair for 'top' and 'bottom' when symbolising the instructions, their meaning is made clearer and easier to understand. The repetition of 'put' and 'shelf' and the consistency between the symbols for 'light' and 'heavy', and 'top' and 'bottom' makes it easier to understand that the two instructions are elements of the same task.

| Put | the light boxes | on the top | shelf |
| Put | the heavy boxes | on the bottom | shelf |
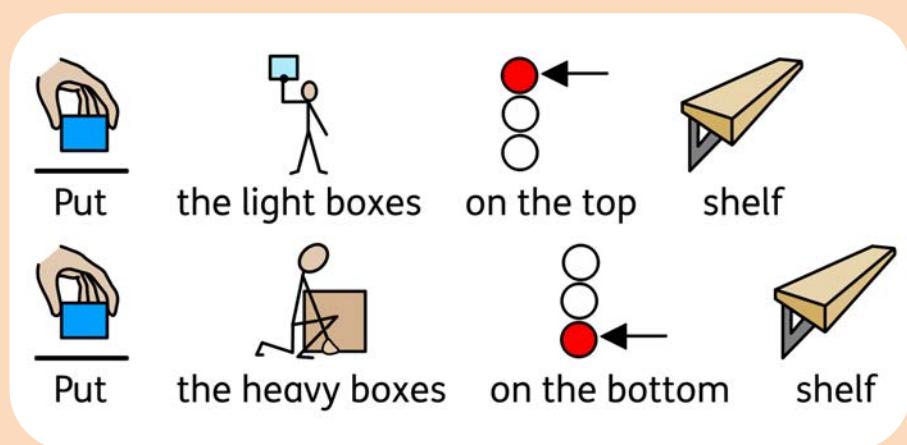
If the shelf-stacking instructions were produced with the inappropriate pair of symbols for 'top' and 'bottom', they would become harder to understand. Similarly, if they were produced with the concepts for 'top' and 'bottom' represented in different ways, then, for some readers, the meaning and the relationship between the two sentences could be lost.

◼ Repetition

Repetition is a valuable tool in simplifying content for symbol readers. Repeating phrases and structures helps keep structure simple and reinforces the theme of the content.

This sentence illustrates a number of concepts and could be too complicated for some readers:

> *'I like to go to the park and while I am there I like to play on the swings and eat ice cream.'*

When symbolising a sentence such as this, it is advisable to break it down into smaller sentences. This allows symbol readers to process the information in more manageable 'chunks' and makes the content significantly easier to understand, without losing any of the meaning.

Using repetition can be an effective way of doing this, such as in this example, where 'I like to' is repeated in every sentence:

> *'**I like to** go to the park'*
> *'**I like to** play on the swings'*
> *'**I like to** eat ice cream'*

Repeating the same phrase every time provides a structure for the reformatted content and reinforces the theme (which in this example is things the writer likes).

Repetition is also an effective means of learning new terms and their corresponding symbols. With regular exposure to the same text and symbol combinations, they will quickly and easily become more familiar and recognisable to the symbol reader.
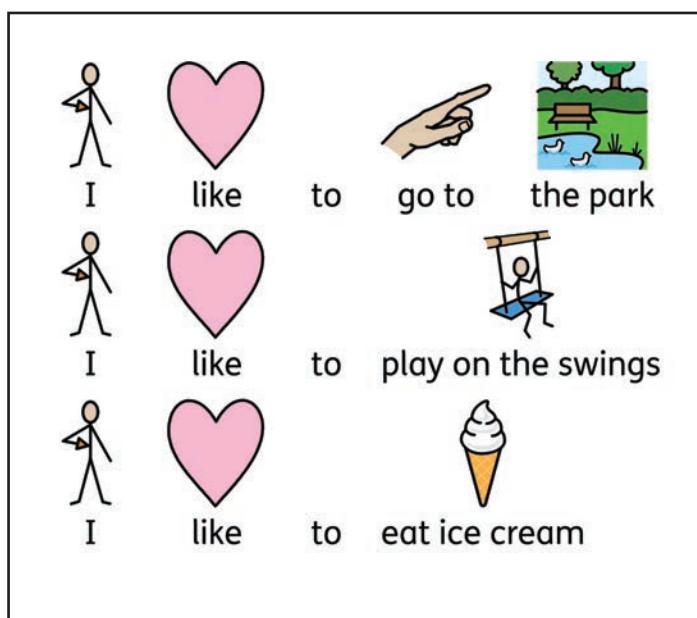
■ Layout and design

The layout of your symbolised content plays an important role in how accessible and easy to understand it will be to a symbol reader.

There are three basic rules to bear in mind when symbolising content which will have a significant impact:

## 1. Achieve the effect of punctuation through layout

With the added visual information provided by symbols, punctuation marks can be easily lost. This means that the information provided needs to be presented in a way that is as easy to look at and to comprehend as possible.

One way of achieving this is by your layout effectively performing the role of punctuation. In a typical document, this could be accomplished by making sure that there is sufficient white space between each line.

For more complex items, such as a timetable or a series of instructions, drawing a box around each sentence is a simple and effective way of showing where sentences begin and end, making sentence structure easier to interpret.
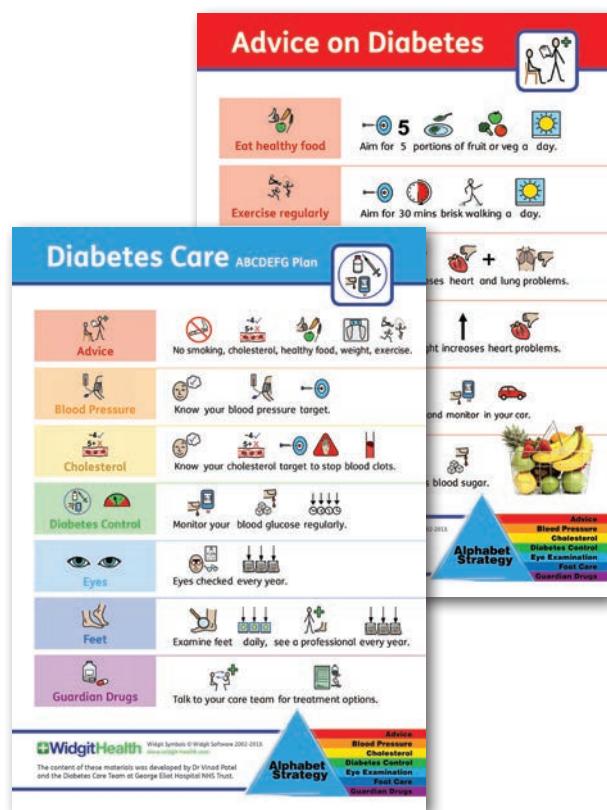
2. Don't use more than eight symbols per sentence

As a general rule, most of us can only think about or remember four things at a time, and we tend to subconsciously group things like telephone numbers into sets of two, three or four numbers. When there are more than two or three of these sets, we find them increasingly hard to commit to memory. The same is true for symbols.

If there are more than eight symbols in a sentence, it can become very difficult for a symbol reader to understand the message as a whole. Remember, not every word needs a symbol (see 'Replacing and combining text'). As a rule, it is best not to use more than eight symbols in one sentence.

3. One sentence per line

When writing symbol-supported content, every sentence should begin and end on the same line. The end of the line effectively performs the same function as a full stop, helping the symbol reader to recognise the beginning and end of each message within the content. If you have no choice but to break a sentence across lines, it is best if the break in the sentence is at an 'and' or a natural speaking pause in the sentence, and the next sentence then starts on the following line.

If one sentence ends and another begins on the same line, it can be very easy for a symbol reader to misunderstand the sentence's meaning and assume the start of the second sentence to be part

of the first. It is important to remember that symbol readers may not be able to understand punctuation, so commas and full stops may not be noticed or understood.

In the first example below, the second sentence is split over two lines. The symbol reader might not see or understand the full stop and misunderstand the messages, therefore assuming 'Lego' and 'marbles' to be part of the first sentence and contained within the soft toys category.

In the second example, where the text has been arranged so that each sentence begins and ends on the same line, it is far easier for the two messages to be understood.

The soft toys are teddies and balloons. Lego, marbles,

robots and yo-yos are hard toys.

The soft toys are teddies and balloons.

Lego, marbles, robots and yo-yos are hard toys.
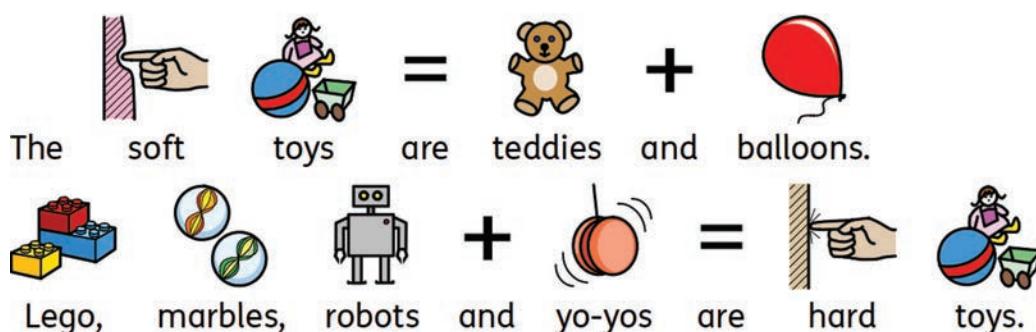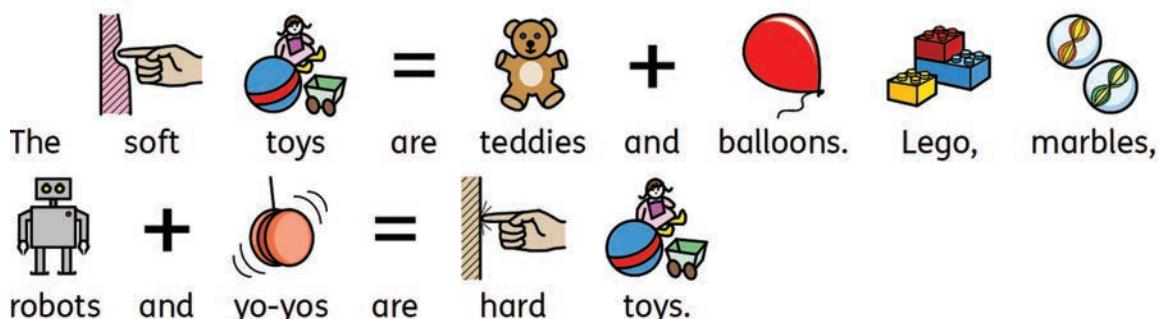
1. Achieve the effect of punctuation through layout
2. Don't use more than eight symbols per sentence
3. Write one sentence per line

5. Checking your content

Although it may seem obvious, taking time to check over your work when you are symbolising your content is an extremely valuable part of the symbolising process.

■ Say it aloud

When creating fully symbolised content or a symbol summary, a great way of checking your content over is to read your text aloud to yourself.

There are two stages at which it is a particularly good idea to check your content over by reading it aloud:

1. When you have written your text to be symbolised

Firstly, you will need to ensure that the text you have written is as plain and simple as possible. When you speak a sentence, it is much easier to do so if it is straightforward. If you stumble over any of the words as you are saying them, it is likely that the text will be difficult to read and you may want to consider revising it.

2. When you have symbolised your content

When you have finished symbolising your text, speaking the words aloud is a very valuable method of ensuring that the words you have chosen sufficiently express what you want to say and that none of the important concepts have been omitted.

■ Review the symbols

It is very important to review the symbols you have chosen and ensure that they illustrate the point you want to make.

Try printing out the symbols without the text, or covering the text with your hand and just look at the symbols. If you are working on-screen with Widgit software, you can temporarily set the text colour to the same colour as the background (e.g. white).

Is the message still clear when you can only see the symbols? Have you used too many abstract symbols that may not be understood by your readers? Are there any important concepts missing from the message?
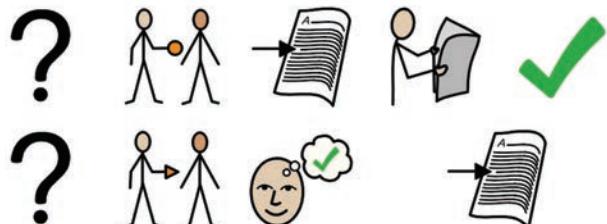
Deciding on the right way to support content with symbols will become easier with experience, as will choosing the right symbols. You can use the checklists at the end of this guide to remind you.

If you need to produce official or specialised symbol-supported content, then you can contact **Widgit's Accessible Information Services** directly to discuss how we can help you.

www.widgit.com/accessibleinformation

A checklist for creating symbolised content

Choosing your method of symbolising:

☐ Do you know what it is that you want to write?

☐ Who will read it?
  Just symbol readers?
  Symbol readers and non-symbol readers?

☐ In what media will your content be available?
  E.g. A leaflet? A letter? A website?

Which method of symbolising have you chosen?

☐ Fully symbolised ☐ Symbol summaries

☐ Content highlights ☐ Key Symbols

☐ Does your choice of media have enough space for your symbolised content?

Don't forget that symbolised text takes up more room than non-symbolised text!

If you are providing symbol support using key symbols or a content highlight...

☐ Do your symbols illustrate the key information?

☐ Are your symbols as transparent as possible? *(See section 2.1)*

☐ Does each symbol accurately represent the meaning of the concept?

(See an example of the two different symbols used to indicate different gyms in a leisure centre in 4.1 Creating key symbols)

☐ Are your symbols consistent with each other?

☐ If you are creating a symbol highlight, do the symbols form a logical sequence?

A checklist for creating symbolised content

If you are creating a symbol summary or fully symbolised content...

- **Writing your content**

    Making a bulleted list of the points you want to include is a good starting point.

☐ Are your sentences as short as possible?

☐ Is your language appropriate for your readers?

☐ Have you checked your content's simplicity by saying it aloud?

If you are creating symbol summaries...

☐ Do your summaries cover all of the key information in your document?

☐ Are your summaries no more than four lines long?

- **Symbolising your content**

☐ Does each symbol accurately represent the word's meaning in the context of the sentence?

    Remember you can retext symbols to help find the most appropriate image

☐ Do the symbols cover all of the main information points in the sentence?

☐ Have you turned off any abstract symbols unnecessary to your reader?

☐ Have you turned on/off any qualifier graphics relevant to your readers level?

☐ Are all your symbols consistent with each other?

☐ Does your layout reinforce the punctuation?

☐ Have you used no more than eight symbols per line?

☐ Can you clearly see the beginning and end of every sentence?

    Read just the symbolised words aloud to make sure you have symbolised all the information-carrying words. Look at just the symbols without the text; do they make sense?

InPrint ③

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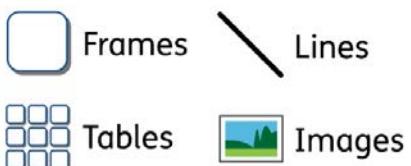
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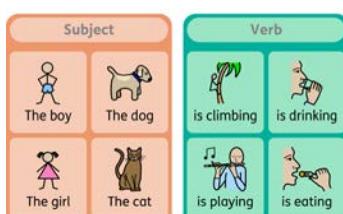
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man   dad   boyfriend   husband   grandad
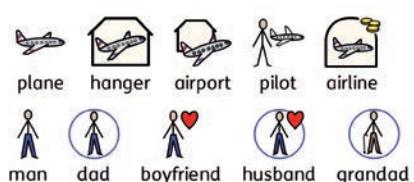
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I can   drink   a   drink.   ✓

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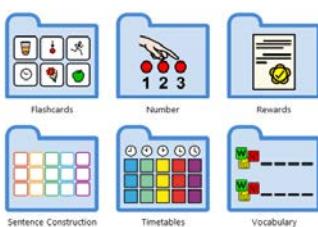
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