

Literacy Outreach Package

Written by
Chris Harwood

Making Contact with Social Agencies

Literacy Awareness Presentation

Literacy Information for Social Agencies



**OTTAWA-CARLETON COALITION FOR LITERACY
and
ALTERNATIVE LEARNING STYLES AND OUTLOOKS**

Outreach Package for Social Agency Staff

The Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy (OCCL) and the adult literacy program ALSO, Alternative Learning Styles and Outlooks, hope this *Outreach Package* will support your outreach strategy and save you preparation time. It is intended for use by literacy professionals who want to inform social agency staff about the issue of literacy and promote adult literacy programs in their region.

We hope that, by sharing this information with agency staff, they will become more knowledgeable and understanding about the issues affecting people with low literacy skills and that they will know who to contact if their clients express an interest in improving their literacy skills.

The *Outreach Package* will help agency staff learn more about the importance of literacy. It shows the extent of literacy problems and illustrates the impact this has on people's lives. It also describes some of the barriers facing people contemplating a return to education. There are suggestions for recognizing literacy issues and descriptions of the types of adult literacy programs that are available.

The *Outreach Package* is in three parts.

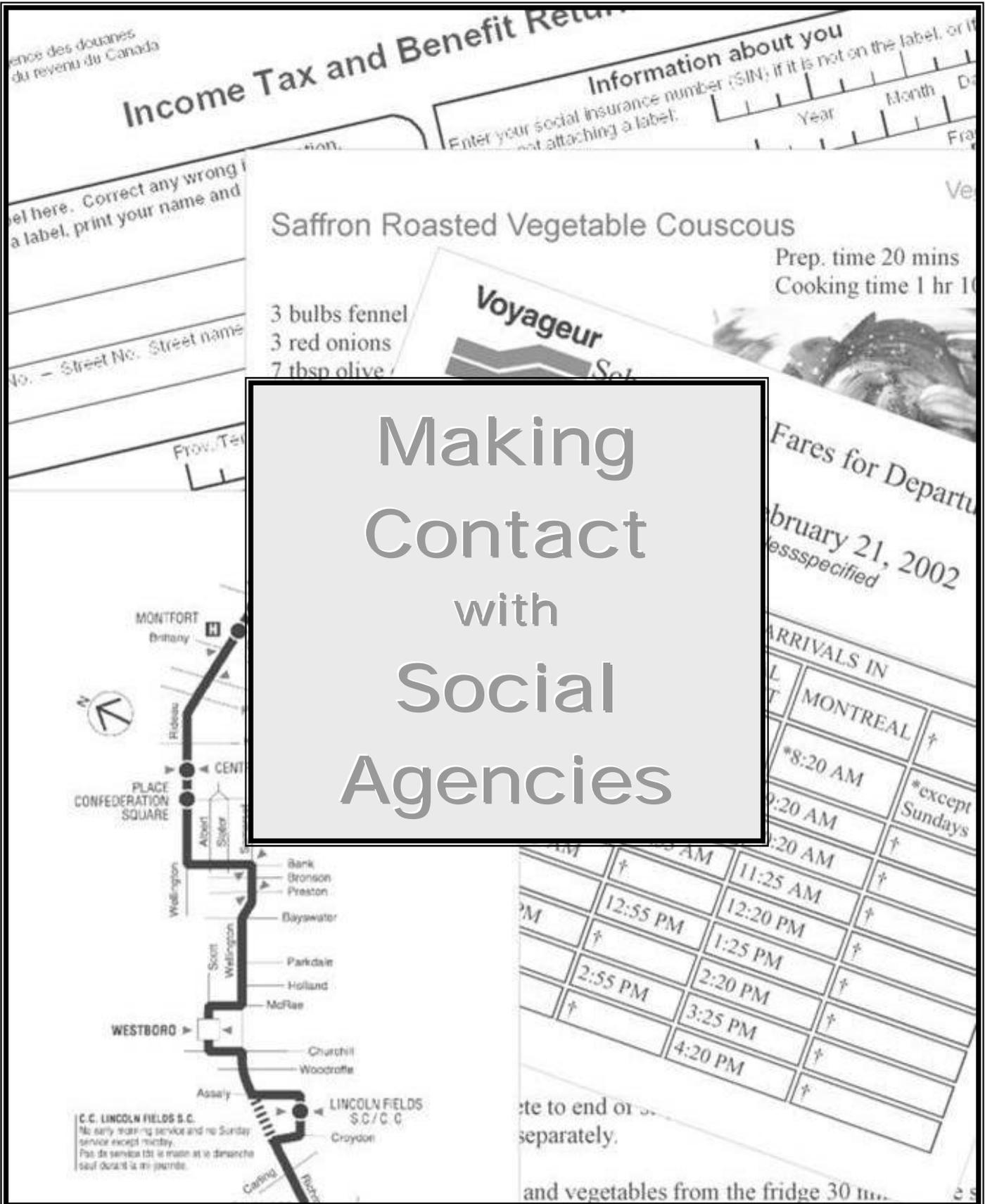
Part One – *Making Contact with Social Agencies* describes a protocol for making the initial contact. Facilitators will want to meet with a staff person from the agency to encourage agency staff to learn more about literacy issues and types of literacy programs in order to better help their clients.

Part Two – *Literacy Awareness Presentation* contains suggestions for an oral presentation to staff in social agencies. Facilitators can choose from suggested topics or substitute their own based on the available time.

Part Three – *Literacy Information for Social Agency Staff* contains written information that should be given to agency staff. Facilitators may want to suggest agencies incorporate *Literacy Information for Social Agency Staff* into their orientation package for new staff.

OCCL gratefully acknowledges the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada and the Workplace Preparation Branch, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities who provided funding for this project. October 2002

Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy



OCCL Literacy Outreach Package

Part 1 – Making Contact with Social Agencies



Contents

Making Contact with Social Agencies	1
The First Contact	1
Sample Letter to Executive Director of Social Agency	2
Questionnaire for Social Agency Staff.....	3
Meeting with Agency Staff	7
Literacy Awareness Presentation	7
Literacy Information for Social Agency Staff.....	7
Maintaining Contact with Agencies.....	7

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Making Contact with Social Agencies

If you are beginning to make contact with social agencies, you may want to focus on agencies that target high need communities and already have information sharing opportunities in place. These agencies will usually have links with other service providers and have some clients with low literacy skills.

You will want to draw up a list of suitable agencies and you may want to develop a cover letter and questionnaire to be used with those agencies.

If you have already made contact with some social agencies in your community you may want to develop a sustainable model for keeping in touch with them.

Both these issues are addressed in part one of the *Outreach Package*.

The First Contact

An experienced literacy practitioner, or the person who is going to be the contact person with the agency, should call the executive directors of targeted agencies. Making contact at this level means that approval to proceed can be given immediately.

Agencies that are interested in increasing their knowledge of literacy issues can be asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire is about the agency's current services, the perceived need for literacy services among their client group, information about their current referral process to literacy programs and suggestions for reaching their clients to let them know about literacy opportunities. The questionnaire and cover letter can be faxed to the agencies and meetings can be arranged to discuss the responses. It is best to arrange the meeting during this phone call as it avoids playing telephone tag.

A sample cover letter follows, together with the questionnaire used by the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy.

Sample Letter to Executive Director of Social Agency

Name and Address of Literacy Organization

Date

Dear,

(Name of your literacy organization) is trying to reach potential learners, with low literacy levels, who are experiencing a variety of barriers and challenges. We are sure that your agency and clients will benefit from your involvement in our outreach strategy.

Our main goal is to develop partnerships with social agencies in order to try to meet the literacy needs of some of their clients. I am enclosing a questionnaire that we have developed and would like you to review it prior to our meeting on (date). You do not need to complete it, as we can record your comments at our meeting.

The questionnaire deals with the following topics:

- services provided by your agency
- services delivered at your site through partnerships with other agencies
- current referral process to literacy programs
- perceived literacy issues among your client group
- suggestions for reaching your clients to let them know about literacy opportunities

I look forward to meeting with you. Your participation is greatly appreciated and your views and insights will be tremendously valuable in developing a partnership that will encourage community members to gain access to literacy services.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns please email me at (e-mail address) or leave a message with (agency name and phone number).

Yours sincerely,

Name

Title

Reaching Potential Learners in Social Agencies

Questionnaire for Social Agency Staff

Name:

Title:

Agency:

Contact information:

Phone:

E-mail:

Fax:

Reaching Potential Learners in Social Agencies

1. Services provided by your agency: (please give a brief description of the types of programs offered by your agency – including frequency/time offered/when program was established)

2. Give a brief description of the client group served by your agency

3. Please list details of any other agency offering services at your agency: (this type of partnership might help us to identify the type of arrangements that would need to be in place for a partnership/link to be effective)

4. In the past year, how many referrals has your agency made to literacy programs?

no referrals	
fewer than 10	
between 10 and 25	
between 25 and 50	
more than 50	

Reaching Potential Learners in Social Agencies

5. If you have made referrals, please complete the chart below.

(Check column 3 if you are familiar with this program.)

Name of Program	Why clients are referred to this program:	Program known
Algonquin College – Career and College Preparation		
ALSO – Alternative Learning Styles and Outlooks		
Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board – Literacy & Basic Skills		
Ottawa-Carleton District School Board – Skills to Go		
People, Words & Change		
CNIB Literacy Program		
Neil Squire Foundation		
John Howard Society		
Ottawa Deaf Centre		
La Magie des lettres		
Le Trésor des Mots		
La Cité Collegiale		

Reaching Potential Learners in Social Agencies

6. When and how are you most likely to identify that a client has low-literacy skills?

7. Do you feel that these clients know that they have low literacy skills?

8. Are there certain areas where you feel it would be useful for some of your clients to have increased literacy skills? (reading report cards, reading to pre-schoolers, helping with homework, rent issues, nutrition, medication, banking, health, communicating with professionals, job search)

9. Do you have any suggestions for reaching your clients to let them know about literacy opportunities?

10. Are there other service providers that you feel should know more about literacy services?

Meeting with Agency Staff

A meeting with a staff person from each agency and the literacy contact person can focus on the responses to the questionnaire. It is often better to use the questionnaire to guide the discussion and for the literacy staff person to make notes.

Offer to provide the agency staff with a literacy awareness presentation. The presentation should be scheduled at a time that suits the agency – usually during a staff meeting when everyone is together anyway. It is important to know the length of time allocated to the presentation.

Literacy Awareness Presentation

Suggestions for topics to include in a literacy awareness presentation can be found in part two. Use the information to tailor a presentation to meet the needs of an individual agency.

Literacy Information for Social Agency Staff

A written package to give to agency staff can be found in part three.

Maintaining Contact with Agencies

Once you have made contact with some of the agencies in your community it may be possible to limit your literacy awareness presentations to twice a year. Participants can come from any agency to take part. Try to enter a partnership with agencies that would be willing to host these sessions and to publicise them to other agencies. Community Health Centres are often willing to do this. Encourage other agencies to send their new staff.

Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy

Income Tax and Benefit Return

Information about you
Enter your social insurance number (SIN) if it is not on the label, or if it is not attaching a label.

Label here. Correct any wrong information. If you are changing the information on a label, print your name and address.

No. - Street No. Street name

Saffron Roasted Vegetable Couscous

Prep. time 20 mins
Cooking time 1 hr 10 mins

- 3 bulbs fennel
- 3 red onions
- 7 tbsp olive oil
- 700 g / lb chickpeas
- 700 g / lb couscous

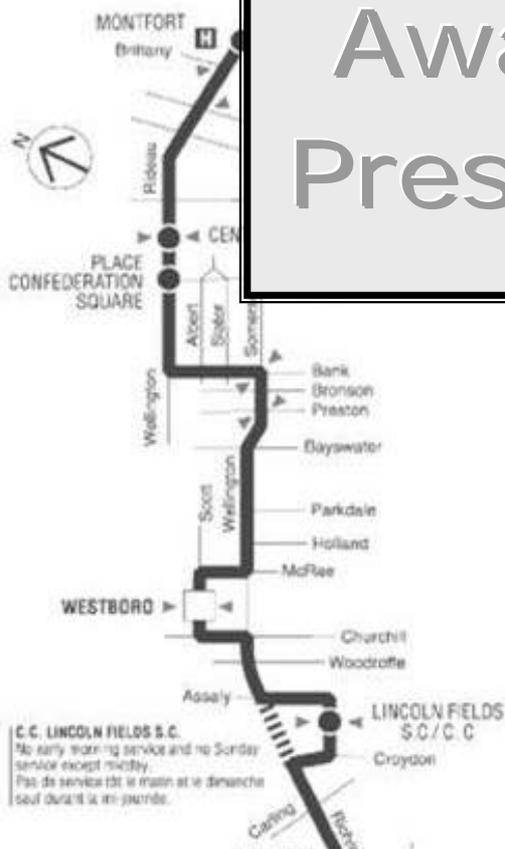


Schedules and Fares for Departures and Arrivals

February 21, 2002
Less specified

ARRIVALS IN	
MONTREAL	†
*8:20 AM	*except Sundays
9:20 AM	

Literacy Awareness Presentation



3:35 AM	10:55 AM	10:20 AM	†
	†	11:25 AM	†
	12:55 PM	12:20 PM	†
	†	1:25 PM	†
	2:55 PM	2:20 PM	†
	†	3:25 PM	†
		4:20 PM	†

... and vegetables from the fridge 30 minutes

OCCL Literacy Outreach Package

Part 2 – Literacy Awareness Presentation



Contents

Literacy Awareness Presentation	1
Introduction to Using the Material in Part Two	1
Notes to the Facilitator	1
Icebreaker – Reading Comprehension	2
Introduction – The Facts	6
What is Literacy?	6
A definition	6
Literacy is a relative term – it depends on a person’s environment	7
IALS Literacy Levels	8
Key Findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey	10
Reading for Meaning	11
Short-Term Memory	14
The Marlup	15
Reasons an adult may have problems with literacy	17
Possible clues that a client has literacy needs	18
Should your client go to a Literacy and Basic Skills Program or an English as a Second Language Program?	19
What is the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition (OCCL) for Literacy?	20
Range of Services Available	20

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Literacy Awareness Presentation

Having made contact with social agency staff and arranged to give them a presentation on literacy issues, you will want to decide on the content.

Introduction to Using the Material in Part Two

The length of your presentation will vary according to the time the agency has allocated. Choose any of the material from part two in order to illustrate the points you want to make. You may even choose to use your own materials to make the same point. The material in part 2 is intended as a guide to help you prepare your presentation as quickly as possible.

Notes to the Facilitator

In this presentation we have used boxes, like the one below, to give suggestions to the facilitator giving the presentation.

Tips and guidance for the person presenting this information are boxed and in italics.



Handouts have this symbol at the top of the page.



Sometimes the facilitator will need to give directions to participants. These directions are bulleted and have this symbol at the beginning.

Icebreaker – Reading Comprehension

Use this activity or a similar one that you have chosen to demonstrate to participants the panic people feel when asked to read something they don't understand. It also shows the difficulty of decoding unfamiliar letters and getting meaning from words they do not understand. It shows them what it is like to have problems reading.



Make an overhead of the versions of the text on the next three pages. Work on each version before showing the next version. Don't mention that it is the Lord's Prayer or Old English, etc.

- Explain to the participants that if they recognize the passage they must not share that information with others.
- Show the Old English version (don't mention "Old English").
- Go round the group asking each participant to read a phrase.
- Ask those who understand the passage to raise their hands.
- Show the Middle English version.
- Ask those who understand the passage to raise their hands.
- Repeat with the Early Modern English version.
- Talk about the feeling they had when they were asked to read. How did participants feel about their difficulty in reading the Old English? - embarrassed, self-conscious, frustrated ...?
- Discuss how it gradually becomes easier to understand as the language becomes more familiar.
- Compare it to reading a page in an unfamiliar language - the reader may be able to say the words phonetically, but not know their meaning.
- Talk about how in the first version, that although you can read most of the letters, you still cannot understand the content.
- Discuss the cultural aspects of this activity in a multi-cultural environment.

Note: the focus of this activity is the **feelings** engendered by being presented with an extremely difficult reading task. The majority of participants will not recognize the words or be able to pronounce some of the letters. If you feel this activity is likely to be culturally unacceptable, then choose another activity that you feel would meet the same outcomes.



Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum, si þin
nama gehalgod. Tobecume þin rice.
Gewurþe ðin willa on eorðan swa swa on
heofonum. Urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle
us todæg. And forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa
we forgyfað urum gyltendum. And ne
gelæd þu us on costnunge ac alys us of
yfele. Soþlice.



Oure fadir that art in heuenes halowid be thi name, thi kyngdooom come to, be thi wille don in erthe es in heuene, yeue to us this day oure breed our othir substaunce, and forgyue to vs oure dettis, as we forgyen to oure dettouris, and lede us not in to temptacioun: but delyuer vs fro yuel, amen.



Our father which are in heaven hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever, amen.

Introduction – The Facts

It is important that participants realize the extent of the literacy problem in Canada. The IALS survey is a useful starting point.

In 1994, seven industrialized countries participated in the International Adult Literacy Survey, (IALS). Statistics Canada administered the Canadian component. Eventually nineteen countries participated and the information collected has given us lots of useful information about the literacy skills of people in those countries.

It was found that over 35% of Ontarians have either serious problems dealing with printed materials or can only deal with simple reading tasks. The findings also revealed that those most in need of improving their skills seldom participate in adult education. Adult Literacy and Basic Skills programs serve less than 10% of the population who could benefit from improved literacy skills. (Long & Middleton, 2001)

What is Literacy?

If time permits, ask participants to come up with their own definition of literacy. If not, share your own definition or the one suggested below.

A definition

The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential. *International Adult Literacy Survey 1994*

Literacy is a relative term – it depends on a person’s environment

Here is an example that illustrates the point. (A person with a grade five education in a developing country will probably be seen as educated whereas a person in Ottawa with only a grade five education will likely find it difficult to get a job.)

You could use this example or use one from your own experience.

A farmer in Mozambique who has a grade 5 education may be considered reasonably well educated and literate in his own community. His government may recognize this by writing at the grade 5 level when producing information on farming, health and other community issues. The farmer may become an important resource person for other villagers. They will consult him regarding new information.

If that same farmer were to move to Canada, he would find himself in very different circumstances. Aside from possible language difficulties, a grade 5 education would not give him any special status. This person would want to work on speaking and listening skills as a matter of priority. Improved literacy skills would be the next step.

A person born and raised in Canada with a grade 5 education may well be employed in a job that does not require many literacy skills. He or she may function effectively at work and at home but have the support of another family member for literacy related tasks, such as reading official documents. The person may not have a need for improved literacy skills while circumstances remain stable. If that person loses his or her job, or support of the family member, then it is quite likely that the person’s life will change dramatically. He or she may want to enroll in a literacy program to meet the changed circumstances.

You may want to suggest that participants watch the movie “Central Station” that is set in Brazil and shows the impact of low literacy levels on everyday life.

IALS Literacy Levels

Describe the IALS Levels using the information below and the poster on the next page. You might want to put the poster on an overhead transparency to make it easier for everyone to see or provide it as a handout.

- Level 1 Individuals have great difficulty reading.
They are generally aware that they have a problem.
- Level 2 Individuals are reading, but not well.
They can deal with material that is simple and clearly laid out.
They often do not recognize their limitations.
- Level 3 This is considered by many countries a basic skills level, but some occupations require higher skills.
Individuals read well, but have some problems with more complex tasks.
- Level 4/5 Individuals have a high level of literacy.
They can meet most reading demands.

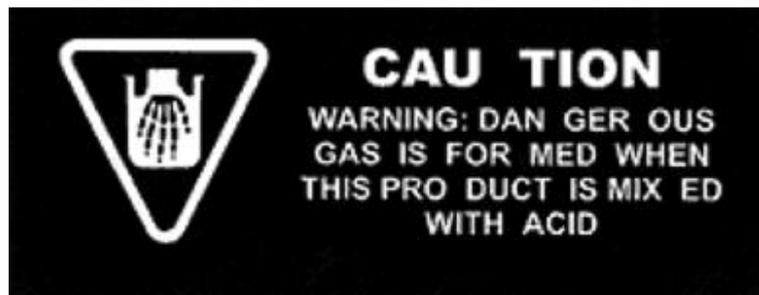
See “Highlights from the Second Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey: Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society” for chart showing literacy levels by country.



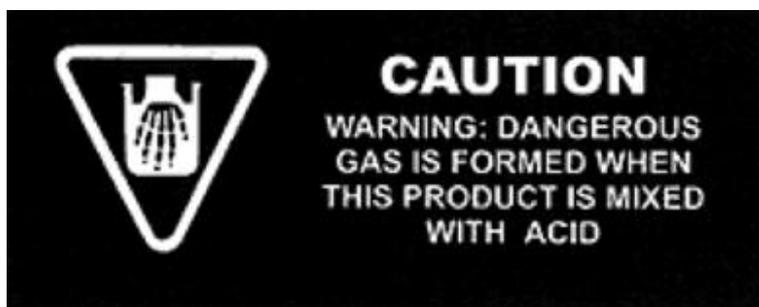
What an IALS level 1 reader sees:



What an IALS level 2 reader sees:



What an IALS level 3 reader sees:



Key Findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey

Use these findings to illustrate the importance of literacy skills. If time is limited, you may want to omit this information.

1. Literacy is strongly associated with economic success. An individual's literacy level can indicate their success in the labour market.
2. In North America there is a direct correlation between the quantitative literacy scale and income. The higher the literacy proficiency (Level 4/5), the higher the income.
3. Most adults with low literacy skills do not acknowledge that their skills present them with difficulties. This may reflect the fact that many occupy jobs that do not require the use of literacy - a fact which is likely to change.
4. Adult education and training programs are less likely to reach individuals with low literacy skills as most training goes to those with high skills.
5. Literacy skills are maintained and strengthened through regular use. Formal education provides the base but evidence indicates that applying literacy skills in daily activities - both at home and at work - is associated with higher levels of performance.
6. Important differences in literacy skills exist within and among countries. These differences are large enough to matter both socially and economically.

*from: Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada,
International Adult Literacy Survey, Statistics Canada*

Reading for Meaning

Literacy is more than just decoding text. It involves reading, writing, listening, speaking, analysis and problem-solving skills.

You may want to share the following information about decoding to illustrate the problems that poor readers have with reading for meaning.

The samples are included after this activity. You could transfer this information onto an overhead transparency to make it easier for everyone to see.

Adapted from "A Handbook for ESL Literacy" - Jill Bell & B Burnaby

Poor readers rely heavily on the spelling of words as their source of information. They read each word, struggle letter by letter, so occupied with decoding that they cannot concentrate on meaning. They frequently lose the thread of the sentence before they get to the end.



- Show the overhead with the string of letters for a few seconds and then cover it. Ask participants to name the letters they saw. Keep the other information on the overhead covered.

f z g i h r c t u w d h

Most people can only identify 5 - 6 letters at a time.

- Show the next example for a few seconds. Ask them to tell you the words that they remember.

yet paper snow drive yacht when through

When the letters are arranged in words the same brief glance will enable us to read at least twice as many letters.

- Show the last example for a few seconds. Ask them to tell you what they remember.

The child was riding a yellow bicycle.

Participants will realize that the last example is much easier to remember.

If the words make a meaningful sentence people can often identify as many as twenty or thirty letters at a glance.

The brain recognizes chunks of material and processes these chunks rather than individual letters. Experienced readers do not read every letter in a word before identifying the word, any more than reading every word in an article before identifying the main point the author is making.

Explain that if it takes a lot of effort to decode a text, then it is less likely that the reader will be getting meaning from the text.



f z g i h r c t u w d h

**yet paper snow drive
yacht when through**

**The child was riding a
yellow bicycle.**

Short-Term Memory

Decoding letter-by-letter can result in short-term memory overload. The brain can only hold about six or seven items in short-term memory. If we try to put too much information into our short-term memory, we push out other information and cannot make sense of what we read.

You may want to use this example to illustrate the point.



- Ask participants to dial phone number 682-7349.
- Tell them that the exchange has changed to 884.
- Ask them what the new number is.

We have usually forgotten the original number and have to look it up again. The same thing happens with reading.

From “A Handbook for ESL Literacy” - Jill Bell & B Burnaby

Second language learners often have trouble with syntax so word order doesn't give them the kind of help it gives native speakers.

The Marlup

The Marlup is an example of how it is possible to decode and answer questions on a text without understanding it. Alternatively, you may choose to use another example.



- Hand out the story and questions on the page that follows. Give participants a few minutes to answer the questions.
- The Marlup – Suggested Answers:
 1. What did the narg horp in the marlup's kump?
The narg horped some whev in the marlup's kump.
 2. What did the marlup juf the narg?
The marlup jufd "Why did vump horp whev in my frinkle kump?"
 3. Was the narg trungy?
Yes, the narg was *muvvily* trungy.
 4. Give the meaning of the following words: poving, kump, horp, frinkle
Can't be done! You can only get so far without understanding the words.
 5. Opinion - do you think poving should be encouraged?
Can't be done! You can only get so far without understanding the words.

Because there is a backbone or structure to English, you can still pick out subjects, objects, verbs and so on. You can guess the answers to a question based on the sentence structure. You may be able to answer questions about a text without fully understanding the content.

Often poor readers will be so busy decoding that they do not get the sense of the text. "The Marlup" simulates how a poor reader may feel having read a text that he does not understand.

The Marlup



Read the following story and give full sentence responses to the comprehension questions which follow it.

A marlup was poving his kump. Parmily a narg horped some whev in his kump. “Why did vump horp whev in my frinkle kump?” the marlup jufd the narg. “Er’ m muvvily trungy,” the narg grupped. “Er heshed vump norpled whev in your kump. Do vump pove your kump frinkle?”

Questions

1. What did the narg horp in the marlup’s kump?
2. What did the marlup juf the narg?
3. Was the narg trungy?
4. Give the meaning of the following words:
poving kump horp frinkle
5. Do you think poving should be encouraged?

Reasons an adult may have problems with literacy

It is useful for participants to reflect on how people might have come to have problems with literacy. It may help them to be more supportive and to recognize that these issues may have had an impact on the literacy skills of their clients.

Depending on the time you have available you might want to ask participants to brainstorm possible reasons or you might just want to present the information.

Here are some reasons:

- poverty, cycle of low literacy in family
- learning disability, including ADHD
- cognitive limitations
- psychiatric disorder
- physical disability
- family problems – violence, divorce, frequent moves, more than one language spoken in the family
- “social promotion” in schools
- drug or alcohol abuse

Note: in Ottawa, some people have grown up speaking a mixture of English and French and have not gained an adequate understanding of either language (written or spoken). Others have come from different countries and haven't learned to read and write in their first language.

Possible clues that a client has literacy needs

It is useful to share some information about the ways that agency staff might recognize that a client has literacy issues.

- Many of the adults in literacy programs have experienced some dramatic change in their circumstances which has lead them to approach a program.
- Remember that literacy is a relative thing and must be viewed in terms of context.
- An elderly person who has lost a spouse may not want to go back to school so it may be better to find a volunteer or family member to help them with literary needs.
- Many adults with literacy problems have developed coping strategies to cover their lack of skills.
- Very rarely do literacy programs encounter adults who have a total absence of literacy skills. Most adults entering Literacy and Basic Skills programs have some reading skills and a limited written vocabulary.

Refer to “Indicators” under the heading “Recognizing Literacy Needs” in the written package.

Should your client go to a Literacy and Basic Skills Program or an English as a Second Language Program?

This distinction is often a difficult one for agency staff and discussion with some suggestions will help guide staff to appropriate resources.

Is your client able to carry on a conversation with you, particularly on the telephone?

- If the answer is “yes,” and your client needs help with reading she is probably ready to go to a literacy and basic skills program.*

Do you have to repeat a lot of what you are saying?

Do you have to ask her to repeat things she says?

Do you have to paraphrase a lot?

- If the answers are “yes,” your client probably needs more language training. In time, when her language skills are stronger she may want to move to a literacy program.

* Note: LBS levels 1 – 5 are the equivalent of up to grade 9.
”Upgrading” to the equivalent of grade 12 is also available.

What is the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition (OCCL) for Literacy?

If you are not working in Ottawa-Carleton you will want to substitute relevant information.

- OCCL is one of sixteen literacy networks in Ontario supporting the work of Literacy and Basic Skills programs in our area. It was one of the earliest literacy networks to form in Ontario and has been in operation since June 1984.
- It does not offer instruction in literacy but is involved in the areas of service planning; professional development activities for literacy instructors; managing field development projects; and organizing and participating in outreach and public awareness activities.
- It operates the ABC Line, an information and referral service for adults who want to upgrade their literacy and basic skills.

Distribute OCCL pamphlets or those from your region.

Range of Services Available

Again you will want to substitute your own information if you are not working in the Ottawa-Carleton region.

- Refer to the *Quick Guide* and *Directory of Literacy and Basic Skills Programs in Ottawa* (published by OCCL) at www.occl.ca

Note to participants: we don't expect you to become experts in LBS services!!!!!!!!!!!!!! The materials are intended for reference only.

-
- Call ABC Line at 233-3232 for information about anglophone programs or INFO-FORMATION at 296-0234 for information about francophone programs

 - Limited access programs in Ottawa-Carleton:
 - Neil Squire Foundation's Access to Literacy Program
 - CNIB Literacy Program for Deafblind Adults
 - Ottawa Deaf Centre
 - John Howard Society of Ottawa

 - Open access programs include either anglophone or francophone services. They are full-time or part-time and are offered at no cost to learners. There are college, school board and community-based programs.

Allow time for a question and answer period

Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy

Income Tax and Benefit Return

Information about you

Enter your social insurance number (SIN) if it is not on the label, or if it is not attaching a label.

Year Month Day

Label here. Correct any wrong information. If you are changing your name, print your name and address on a separate label.

No. - Street No. Street name

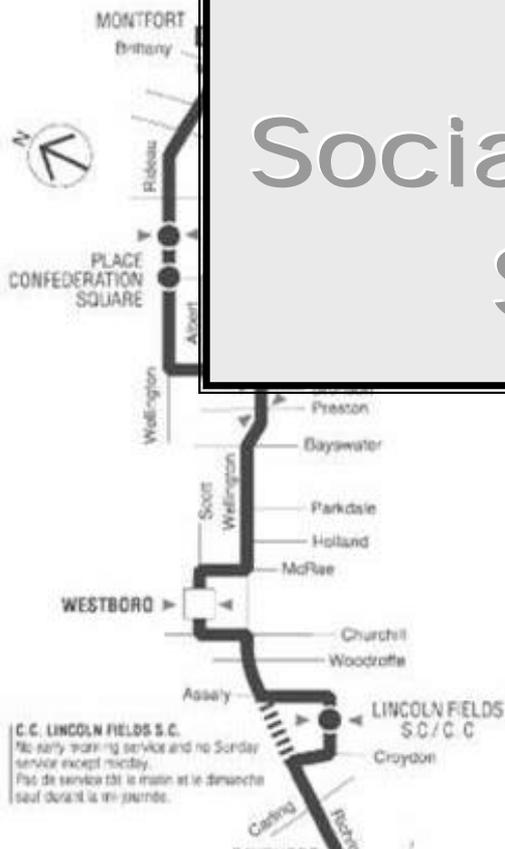
Saffron Roasted Vegetable Couscous

Prep. time 20 mins
Cooking time 1 hr 10 mins

- 3 bulbs fennel
- 3 red onions
- 7 tbsp olive oil

Voyageur

Literacy Information for Social Agency Staff



ares for Departu
February 21, 2002
sspecified

RIVALS IN

	MONTREAL	
8:20 AM	†	*except Sundays
10 AM		
12:00 AM	†	
1:00 AM	†	

12:55 PM	12:20 PM	†
†	1:25 PM	†
2:55 PM	2:20 PM	†
†	3:25 PM	†
	4:20 PM	†

and vegetables from the fridge 30 min...

OCCL Literacy Outreach Package

Part 3 – Literacy Information for Social Agency Staff



Contents

Introduction to Literacy Awareness	1
Literacy awareness	1
Literacy is more than just reading and writing.....	1
Reasons an adult may have problems with literacy	1
Taking steps to develop literacy skills	1
The importance of Literacy and Basic Skills programs	2
A learner-centred approach	2
Types of adult literacy programs.....	2
Finding the right program	3
What can you do?	3
An Accessible Environment.....	4
Your environment	4
Print-based materials	4
Staff and volunteer awareness.....	4
Recognizing Literacy Needs	5
Indicators.....	5
Taking it a step further	5
Taking action.....	5
Clear Writing, Layout and Design	6
What is clear language writing?	6
Design and layout.....	6
How to write clearly.....	6
Using the Public Library	8
Services	8
What can you do?.....	8

OCCL gratefully acknowledges the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada and the Workplace Preparation Branch, Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities who provided funding for this project. October 2002

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INTRODUCTION TO LITERACY AWARENESS

Literacy awareness

Almost half the population of Canada has limited basic skills. This causes serious disadvantages at work and at home. Problems with reading and writing can lead to anxiety and low self-esteem.

A quarter of Canadians may not be able to read a poster and say where a concert is being held, calculate the area of a room (even with the aid of a calculator), locate plumbers in the Yellow Pages, or calculate change out of \$5 for three items of food.

How much do you take your literacy skills for granted? What have you read or calculated today? You may well have read gas prices, billboards, a menu, labels or the newspaper, not to mention work-related documents. You read for information and pleasure but also to make comparisons and informed decisions based on what you have read.

Literacy is more than just reading and writing

Today, literacy includes the ability to understand information and technology and apply it to everyday life. Literacy has a direct link to our quality of life. Our economy relies increasingly on a highly-skilled workforce who can transfer their skills effectively and keep pace with changing technology.

Reasons an adult may have problems with literacy

For many, attending school was not a positive experience. Adults who do not read and write well may be people who dropped out of high school; people with physical, mental and/or learning disabilities; people with cognitive limitations; people who experienced family problems such as violence, divorce or frequent

moves; or people who haven't been using their literacy skills as adults.

Very rarely do these adults have a total absence of literacy skills. Most of them have some reading skills and a limited written vocabulary. However, literacy is more than just decoding text. People read for meaning and so that they can analyze information and solve problems. Poor readers, however, are so preoccupied with reading each word and struggling letter by letter that they cannot concentrate on meaning. They frequently lose the thread of a sentence before getting to the end. This can result in frustration.

Taking steps to develop literacy skills

People with low literacy skills are often adept at hiding their difficulties. They may say they have forgotten their glasses or pretend to read the newspaper when, in fact, they can only read a few words and are unable to make sense of the content. Many adults with low literacy skills do not acknowledge these difficulties.

A few jobs still only require minimal skills. However, when a person loses a low-skilled job, finding a new job can be very difficult. People with low literacy skills are increasingly marginalized when it comes to employment. The following local job ad for a janitor illustrates this.

Working in a highly technical environment, you will perform general custodial and janitorial duties, including waste removal and clean room maintenance and disinfection.

You have a Grade 12 education with related janitorial experience and a capacity for reading and understanding technical procedures. Excellent communication skills and an ability to work well within a team environment are essential.

Often people with poor literacy skills do not enroll in literacy programs. The time may not be right. A single parent coping with small children may not have the energy or motivation to make changes. They may be insecure and suffering from stress. They may not know how to access child care facilities or they may feel they do not have the necessary time to improve their skills. They may not appreciate that they have a problem. They may not believe that a literacy program can help; why go through the humiliation of school all over again? You should be aware of these barriers and be willing to acknowledge them.

However, when people are ready to address their literacy issues, it is important that they know about literacy programs and how to access them.

The importance of Literacy and Basic Skills programs

Literacy programs help adults to strengthen their employment prospects and prepare for further education and training. The programs also help them to become more independent and increase their self-esteem. The primary goal of staff and tutors is to improve learners' self confidence and basic literacy skills.

Staff and tutors work with learners to help them improve any or all of the following:

- basic skills in reading, writing, numeracy, communication and life skills
- general knowledge
- abstract and critical thinking skills
- job readiness skills

This may result in learners being better able to:

- communicate ideas, access information, solve problems
- understand themselves
- participate more fully in society
- appreciate their language and culture
- improve the quality of their lives
- prepare for employment
- become more independent

A learner-centred approach

If you are providing services to people who are interested in improving their literacy skills, it is important to explain that most literacy programs do not reflect the school experience.

The majority of literacy programs promote a learner-centred approach. Learning takes place based on individual needs with instructors and learners working as equals.

Learners participate actively in planning their program of study. Staff and tutors encourage learners to take control of their own learning. Instructors recognize and respect a learner's ability to make decisions and be successful.

Learning is relevant and takes place in an atmosphere of encouragement and mutual respect. Instructors provide tools, experience and resources but ultimately learners are responsible for their own learning. Program staff and tutors accept diversity and are not judgmental. They maintain confidentiality and recognize the many other demands on learners' time.

When a learner is interested in joining a literacy program, staff will complete a goal-directed assessment interview and develop a training plan with input from the learner. The training plan is broken down into the steps the learner needs to take to be able to reach his goal.

Types of adult literacy programs

Literacy and basic skills programs in Ottawa are run by school boards, colleges and community-based agencies.

College programs

College programs are designed for adults who wish to upgrade their academic skills to enter post secondary programs or to retrain for new employment. Instruction often takes place in large classroom settings. A range of options is available including preparatory programs for entry into health sciences, technology and

computer training. There may be financial assistance for eligible learners and services for students with disabilities.

School board programs

Programs offered by school boards are usually based in classroom settings. Many learners are preparing for secondary school credit courses or employment. Classes are sometimes held in locations such as community centres.

Community-based programs

These programs serve adults with a variety of goals including increasing their independence or finding entry level employment. They offer one-on-one tutoring or small group classes for adults who may:

- find it difficult to keep up with the speed and skills required in larger classes
- need to work at their own pace
- need individual help from the instructor
- want flexible hours
- be seasonal workers wanting training in their months of unemployment
- join a small class targeted at a particular group, e.g. parents of pre-school children

They also offer programs for the following:

- deaf and hard of hearing adults
- deafblind adults
- developmentally delayed adults
- adults with significant physical disabilities

Finding the right program

Adults who would like to improve their literacy skills should call:

ABC Line at **233-3232** (English)

INFO-FORMATION at **296-0234** (French)

The ABC Line is an information and referral service for adults who want to upgrade their literacy and basic skills. It is operated by the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy (OCCL). Visit the OCCL website at: www.occl.ca for more information.

What can you do?

As a staff member of a community agency you do not need to become an expert in Literacy and Basic Skills services. You can refer adults who are interested to the ABC Line or INFO-FORMATION and be available to provide moral support if necessary.

AN ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENT

Your environment

Here are some suggestions to help your agency staff and volunteers become more sensitive and responsive to people with low literacy skills. These ideas will also benefit people whose first language is not English.

Have you ever taken a walk around your facility and looked at it from the point of view of someone who has problems with print-based materials?

- Is it easy to see where to go? (e.g. some agencies use footsteps painted on the floor as a guide)
- Is it obvious what services you offer?

Are there changes you could implement to make it more accessible and welcoming to someone with low literacy skills?

- Is your environment warm, welcoming and supportive?

Print-based materials

Are your posters, brochures, pamphlets and newsletters written in clear language? Do they use graphics that help the reader understand the written content?

- Do you have a clear language policy?
- Is your bulletin board overcrowded?
- Do staff and volunteers:
 - offer help with completing forms?
 - provide information orally as well as in writing?
 - explain information orally using clear language?
 - check that information has been understood? Simply asking “Do you understand?” is likely not enough. For example, ask, “So, what are your next steps going to be?”

- use visuals wherever possible, for example slides, videos, pictures, posters, drawings?
- avoid jargon?
- explain professional terminology?

Staff and volunteer awareness

Last but not least:

- Do you provide training about literacy awareness for your staff and volunteers?
- Are staff and volunteers sensitive to the needs of people with low literacy skills?
- Would they recognize that someone might have low literacy skills?
- Are they aware that low literacy does not reflect on intelligence?
- Do all staff and volunteers know about the ABC Line?

RECOGNIZING LITERACY NEEDS

Indicators

Most adults will not talk about their need for literacy help and in some cases simply don't recognize that they have a need. The following are indicators that may suggest literacy is an issue for your client. They should be seen as clues, not proof.

Are you working with someone who:

- consistently shows up very early, very late or not at all for appointments and does not appear to record appointments anywhere (e.g. on a calendar)
 - asks very few questions about printed information or asks a lot of questions that are obviously answered in the material
 - puts printed material away without looking at it (to "read later") or leaves it behind
 - has great difficulty filling in forms accurately and completely
 - obviously has forms or notes completed by another person
 - forgets to bring glasses on a regular basis
 - is unable to follow up on your written or printed instructions (notes, forms or letters)
 - has a child doing poorly in school but seems unwilling to discuss this with the school
- (e.g. basic, vocational, special education, advanced)
 - What subjects or activities did you do well in at school? What subjects were difficult for you?
 - Do you remember ever being tested for learning disabilities? Do you remember anything about the results of this testing?
 - Were you ever away from school for long periods of time? (e.g. illness, suspension, etc.)
 - How do you use reading and writing in your daily life? (e.g. Do you read the newspaper? If you do, what parts of the newspaper do you read most often?)
 - In what daily activities do you use math? (e.g. banking, shopping, cooking)

Taking it a step further

If you have concerns, and you feel comfortable, ask your client if she has any concerns about her spelling and writing skills. Don't ask if she has problems with literacy. Or you might try asking your client some or all of the following questions in order to get more information:

- How far did you go in school?
- What school (if the client is from Ottawa) or what type of program did you attend?

Taking action

If your client is ready to address her literacy issues, suggest that she call the ABC Line for help with reading, writing, spelling, grammar or math. It is operated by the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy (OCCL). You can also find information on the OCCL website at: www.occl.ca.

ABC Line at 233-3232 (English)

INFO-FORMATION at 296-0234 (French)

CLEAR WRITING, LAYOUT AND DESIGN

Clear writing, layout and design are an integral part of literacy. When writing is not clear people lose interest, get frustrated and give up. Many more people will understand and use information written in clear language. Clear writing is inclusive and focuses on the needs of the reader. Designing a visually attractive layout is just as important as the written content.

What is clear language writing?

Clear language writing is a way of organizing information so that it makes sense to the reader. It uses straightforward, concrete words and includes examples that relate to the readers' experience. It helps **all** readers understand information and avoids misunderstanding. Keeping writing clear does not mean you have to sacrifice the content. Your writing is clear when the people it is intended for find it interesting and easy to read. It is not insulting to people who read well because it allows them to find information quickly.

Being clear is more impressive than complex and condescending language.
Movement for Canadian Literacy - Factsheet

Design and layout

When you are writing make sure there is lots of white space as this helps the reader to navigate the text. Use graphics when they improve understanding. Short lines with a ragged right margin are easier to read. Serif type (with a thin line at the top and bottom of the main stroke of a letter) is easier to read, particularly in small typefaces but you should use sans-serif type for posters, overheads, titles and sub-headings. This information package uses Times New Roman font for body text and Arial for headings. Bullets and lists help to separate points and make them clear.

How to write clearly

It takes time and effort to write clearly but the benefits to the reader make it worthwhile.

"I am sorry this letter is so long.
I did not have the time to make it shorter."

Voltaire

You have to think, plan, write, design the layout, revise, edit, test with readers and revise again. Write naturally – pretend you are giving someone the information orally. Use “you” to address the reader personally. It will engage your readers and let them know what you expect them to do. As a writer, you will feel good when you have produced a piece of clear writing. The steps that follow will help to guide you through the process.

Put yourself in the readers' place. Your readers may have difficulty reading complicated material, they may be reading in their second language, they may have learning disabilities or they may just be busy people with too much to read in too little time. Be inclusive. Learn about your audience; consult with them and ask them what they need to know. Your writing level will vary depending on whether you are writing to a group of professionals or the general public. If you are writing for the public avoid jargon.

Answer the following questions before you start writing.

Step 1: Audience

- Who do you want to read the material?
- Why do you want them to read it?
- What do you want them to do after they have read it?

Step 2: Planning

- What information does it need to contain?
- Have you thought about the questions your reader will have?
- Does it answer who, what, when, where, why, how?
- Will the reader see how this material is useful?
- Do you want to write a fact sheet, a brochure, poster or use another type of format?

Step 3: Organization

- Do your ideas follow a logical order?
- Is the most important information first?
- Does the introduction explain the context and content?
- Do you use headings and sub-headings to guide the reader?
- Will graphics help the reader?
- Can the reader find information quickly and easily?

Step 4: The Writing

- Do you address readers directly?
- Do you grab their attention and keep their interest?
- If you are referring to the reader as “you,” have you made sure you have defined the audience clearly?
- Are you using the active voice as it is less complicated and more immediate?
- Have you got one thought in each sentence?
- Are your sentences clear and concise?
- Do your sentences average 15 words, with a maximum of 25 words?
- Are you using simple sentences?
- Are you using a subject, verb, object structure?
- Is there one idea in each paragraph?
- Are you keeping the paragraphs short?
- Do you start each paragraph with a linking sentence?
- Is the writing helpful and accessible?
- Is the tone natural rather than distant?

Step 5: Layout

- Do you use distinguishing headings?
- Are the headings descriptive?
- Have you broken the writing into short sections?
- Are your fonts easy to read?
- Have you avoided upper case fonts?
- Did you use pictures and graphics as clues to the content?
- Is there enough white space?

Step 6: Revision

- Does the content meet the audience’s needs?
- Are there any awkward sentences or typos?
- Have you avoided ambiguity?
- Do you use concrete and familiar words?
- Do you avoid stilted language?
- Is your writing too wordy?
- Has it been reviewed by people in your target audience?
- Did you make revisions based on feedback?

Keep it clear without sacrificing the content! Which is easier to read?

No person driving or in charge of a motor vehicle shall allow such motor vehicle to stand unattended unless it is locked in such a manner as to prevent its operation by any person not authorized by the owner, driver or other person in charge.

or

- Always lock your car before you leave it.
- Never leave your car when the engine is on.

(extract from an example produced by Plain Writing Services, April 1989)

USING THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Services

The Ottawa Public Library (OPL) offers literacy support. The library has a wide variety of books, book and tape sets, and videocassettes for adult learners trying to improve their reading and writing.

OPL provides library orientation tours for organizations upon request. Library membership is free of charge.

What can you do?

Develop partnerships with your local library. Ask local library staff about their services. Take advantage of the special programs they offer and promote them in your agency.

Libraries offer programs covering a range of topics, including computer basics, using the internet, job search, health and social issues, and special interest workshops.

Many branches also offer story time for parents and children, reading groups and special interest workshops for children.

Library programs are described in the quarterly publication *Preview/En primeur*. This publication is available at all branches of the library as well as many community centres.



For further information or assistance, please contact:

Marcia Aronson, Manager, Adult and Readers' Advisory Services,

Ottawa Public Library

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E-mail: Marcia.aronson@library.ottawa.on.ca

For general information call InfoService at 236-0303 or visit the OPL website at

<http://www.library.ottawa.on.ca/english/index.htm>