



Using Clear Language

The Widening Access for Adult Literacies project ran in northeast Edmonton, Alberta, from 2006 to 2009.¹ The main intention of the project was to find ways to make it easier for adults with literacy challenges to access literacy programs and other community resources. Using clear language was a key way to widen access for agency participants.

Clear language includes written communication about an agency's services and programs, signage and website information. It also includes spoken communication between staff and with community members.²

Literacies

In Canada, literacy is often defined as the ability to read and interpret printed information, write, and do mathematical calculations to perform everyday tasks— at work, at home and in the community. In 2009, the Alberta government issued a provincial literacy strategy. It included the following guiding definition:

... While reading and writing provide the necessary foundation for learning, literacy is fundamentally about an individual's capacity to put his/her skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life. Literacy involves "reading the word and the world" in a variety of contexts. Individuals need literacy skills to obtain and use information effectively, to act as informed players and to manage interactions in a variety of contexts whether the context is making decisions about health care, parenting, managing household finances, engaging in the political process or working.³

This definition recognizes that reading not only includes reading skills and strategies but that reading is carried out for various purposes and in various social contexts.

In the Widening Access project we used the term "literacies" to recognize that literacies includes a wide range of social and cultural practices that are associated with reading, writing and oral communication. Reading is affected by purposes and situations as well as the feelings and values associated with them.

Developed by Michael Wallace, 2009.

Widening Access for Adult Literacies Project.
<http://www.wideningaccessforliteracies.ca>



¹ The project was sponsored by The Learning Centre Literacy Association and The Candora Society of Edmonton. The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resources Development Canada, provided funding.

² "Community members" may refer to agency clients, participants or customers.

³ Alberta Advanced Education and Technology. (2009). p. 2.

A literacies perspective values the range of reading and writing that are based in everyday activities and networks, as well as the traditionally more valued literacies associated with schools, workplaces, legal and medical, government and similar institutions.

At the same time, literacies recognizes that institutional literacies are often more powerful than others. They can pose barriers for people with literacy challenges and can be difficult for others as well. Using clear language and clear writing can make it easier for all people to manage when reading and writing is required.

Literacy statistics

The *International adult literacy survey (1994-98)* and the *International adult literacy and skills survey (2003)* measured literacy skills of adults in Canada and six other countries. The surveys used common tasks of varying difficulty to assess adults' literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills. The literacy tasks included reading prose and reading documents.

The survey developers used a 500-point scale to rate the complexity of reading tasks. This scale was divided into 5 levels of reading proficiency.⁴ In Canada, it is generally suggested that adults need skills at level three to "participate fully in the knowledge economy."⁵ According to the 2003 survey, 42% of Canada's working age population has reading skills below level three.

Some people who scored below level three can read well enough to cope with everyday situations, but they may have difficulty with unfamiliar literacies or in new situations involving literacy. Again, using clear language and clear writing can make it easier for all people to manage when reading and writing is required.

Benefits of clear language

When agencies use clear language they:

- encourage agency participants to read their organization's information on a regular basis.
- make newsletters, brochures, flyers and forms accessible to community members with low level English literacy or comprehension skills.
- improve readers' response to requests and calls to action.
- reduce miscommunication with readers.
- encourage readers' participation in community educational activities, programs and services.
- engage readers' support in their organization's aims, activities and services.
- help readers feel more included in community life.
- improve communication between their organization and the local community.

⁴ A Frontier College summary of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) 2003. Retrieved April 30, 2010 from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/frontier/ialss03/cover.htm>

⁵ International survey of reading skills. The Daily. Statistics Canada Retrieved April 30, 2010 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/080109/dq080109a-eng.htm>

Introducing clear language

Near the start of the Widening Access project, staff from The Candora Society asked for help with clear writing. The project animator and coordinator facilitated a workshop to introduce clear language ideas and Candora staff developed a clear writing policy and templates for their agency's staff to use.

The project animator prepared a brochure about clear writing and helped staff in other agencies to review their written materials and bulletin boards from a clear language perspective. As interest in clear language use grew, the project contracted a consultant to develop and facilitate clear writing workshops.

Clear writing workshops

In January, 2007 the project offered a Writing for Your Readers (clear writing) workshop for principals of schools in the project area. The idea was to encourage clear writing in school newsletters and other information that was sent to parents.

To prepare, project staff met with a group of adult literacy students to review the readability of school newsletters. Questions to focus the review included: "Do you read the newsletters?" "Do you find them helpful?" "How easy is it to get information from them?", etc.

Project staff also looked at a wide range of school newsletters. Many newsletters were colourful and bright, but few of them followed clear writing principles of layout, design and language use. Most included the principal's message on the front page, and many of the messages had a readability level that would be difficult for readers with literacy challenges.

Staff also found translation slips provided by the health region for schools to use when sending out newsletters and other important notices to parents. Translation slips are in eight different languages and include messages like "This is important. Please take it to someone who can translate."

Project staff planned two workshops, with the second workshop focusing on clear writing practice for forthcoming newsletters. Ten participants attended the first workshop, including principals, vice-principals and administrative assistants. The second workshop was mainly attended by administrative assistants; project staff learned that it is usually the administrative assistant who put the school newsletters together.

Staff also realized that they needed access to a computer lab for participants to practice clear writing skills and to use the Microsoft Word Readability Tool. The readability tool would provide immediate feedback on the readability of participants' writing and re-writing activities. Project staff were able to access local school computer labs for subsequent workshops. Participants were enthused and motivated by their ability to make changes to documents that made a real difference.

Workshop topics and activities included:

- Steps to increase readability
- Using Microsoft Word Readability tool
- Putting theory into practice (e.g. changing passive verbs to active ones and rewriting jargon-filled, wordy sentences to simple, meaningful ones)
- Rewriting extracts either from their agency or other samples
- Examples of clear and not-so-clear writing
- Layout and design of flyers, brochures, newsletters, websites, forms and other print-based materials

In each workshop, the facilitator stressed:

- that clear writing is a process of re-writing.
- that the re-writing process is a learned skill that takes time to practice and to master.
- the importance of writing from the readers' point of view.
- considering, when producing documents, one or more parents, participants, customers or clients who had literacy challenges.
- using the Microsoft Words Readability Tool before going to publication.

Feedback was positive and encouraging. Key learnings for participants included:

- using the practical tools on Microsoft word including the readability checker to help the clear writing process.
- the difference between passive and active sentence construction.
- the value of simplifying text and layout.
- the importance of taking the reader into account when writing.
- designing attractive documents with clear layout and easy to find information.
- practical tips on how to increase readability.
- practice and understanding in how to bring down reading grade levels.

After this I will be paying more attention to how I write and what I write. Definitely revising the way I currently do my newsletter.

- Participant

Between January 2007 and June 2008, Widening Access project staff delivered a number of Writing for Your Readers workshops for school and agency staff. It was necessary to put a large amount of time and effort into networking, marketing and organizing these workshops. However, news of their popularity spread across the province, and the workshop facilitator was contracted to run clear writing workshops at various locations around Alberta.

Follow-up and ongoing support

Project staff recognized the need for follow-up with workshop participants and their agencies. They worked with a number of agencies to support and encourage them to make changes to their print-based materials. As well, staff encouraged participants to email newsletters, flyers, brochures and forms to them prior to publication so that they could provide detailed feedback and offer further suggestions for clear language changes.

Staff also worked more intensively with a number of agencies and schools in the project area to develop and refine some of their key print-based materials. Sometimes this help was light and minimal, such as showing a school administrative assistant how to set up the readability tool on the computer: *It is perfect and such a handy tool! Thanks for showing me.*

Sometimes project staff did clear language re-writes for an agency flyer: *Wow ...what an improvement. THANK-YOU for your work on this, I'm sure that it will make a difference. We will be distributing updated promotional packages to the community which will include this helpful information.*

In some cases, project staff met a number of times with agency staff to look at all facets of layout, design and use of language in the production of newsletters and information brochures.

Clear speaking

In the fall 2007, project staff began to consider the place of clear language within the bigger picture of *Creating Literacy Friendly Environments* (see Widening Access for Adult Literacies website) and recognized the need to focus upon the clarity of spoken language as well as clear writing. Spoken language barriers could include an unclear recorded message on an agency phone; the tone of voice used by a receptionist at a first meeting; agency jargon; and an overload of information given in completing an intake form.

Agency staff also sought advice on how to recognize and appropriately respond to clients or participants with literacy challenges. Project staff produced handouts to provide information about some of the face-to-face communication issues.

A clear speaking workshop was held with an agency in early 2008. The workshop included a review of some clear speaking principles, discussion of relevant workplace situations where this was an issue, some role-plays and a review of what helped and hindered clear communication.

Clear language continued to be an important theme of the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project. Agency staff readily identified with the importance of clear language. Their aim is to have well designed and clearly written print materials that advertise their services and programs to all their potential clients and participants.

Widening Access project resources

You can download workshop resources from the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project [website](#).

Other resources

Go to the [links](#) page on the Widening Access for Adult Literacies website.