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Writing for a Changing World: Reaching Low Literacy Audiences With Print Material

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- Half of all Americans read below the tenth grade level. Poor reading skills limit many in their ability to lead productive lives, affecting families and communities as well as themselves.
- Extension staff must develop printed materials geared to appropriate reading levels. The writing tips and resources outlined in this brochure can help you get your message across to people with various reading levels.

"A woman in Detroit brought home a gallon of Crisco for her children's dinner. She thought that she had bought the chicken that was pictured on the label. She had enough Crisco now to last a year but no more money to go back and buy the food for dinner."¹

"I grew up in a small rural community — I graduated from high school — (with) low grade averages in English and social studies, which required much reading. I was ready to work because my school experience made me uncomfortable. I knew that my reading and comprehension were not up to par."²

What do poor reading skills have to do with organizations like Extension?

Much of Extension's success in reaching at-risk families, youth, and culturally diverse audiences requires educational materials that these audiences can and will read. If materials are written at too high a level, people receiving them cannot read or understand them. Others may not make the effort. Consider the following statistics:

- More than 27 million Americans over age 17 are functionally illiterate (they read somewhere below eighth grade level). They can't read well enough to understand a poison warning or instructions on an aspirin bottle.³
- About 40 percent of minority youth are functionally illiterate.⁴
- Three under-educated groups are older learners, rural residents, and the poor.⁵
- An assessment of 163 EFNEP participants in 1992 found that 37 percent read at or below an eighth grade level.⁶

As you can see from these statistics, some of Extension's audiences read at lower levels than what Extension staff typically use in their writing. An example is the series of USDA booklets on Dietary Guidelines that are written at the tenth to fourteenth grade level — well above the eighth grade level recommended for the general public and well above the reading level for certain targeted audiences.

Where do you start?

Once you are aware of the need for more readable educational materials, it's easy to feel uncertain about your writing. You begin to look critically at everything you read. Whether or not you need to develop lower literacy materials as part of your Extension work, consider using some of the following techniques in your everyday writing for greater clarity.

Organization

- Use heading and subheading (these tell the reader what is coming next and break up long columns).
- Present only the most important information.

Language and style

- Use short sentences: not more than 25 words.
- Use short paragraphs: not more than 60 words.
- Write in the active voice, not passive voice: "Read the instructions before beginning" is easier to understand than "Instructions should be read before beginning."
- Use concrete examples to illustrate a point: "You get Vitamin A in dark green leafy vegetables and deep orange vegetables. Spinach, carrots, orange vegetables. Spinach, carrots, or squash are vegetables that have Vitamin A."
- Repeat new or unfamiliar information to reinforce learning.
- Avoid clichés and jargon: "Labels let you in on the inside" may be too abstract. "Container labels can tell you a lot about what's inside the package" is better.
- If you must use a technical, unfamiliar word, explain the word with a simple definition or example.
- Repeat new or unfamiliar words several times to make them more familiar to the reader.
- Use positive statements: "Follow safe practices" is better than "Do not follow unsafe practices."

Design

- Use an unjustified right margin.
- Use larger, easy-to-read type for text (10-12 point).
- Use upper and lower case letters, which are easier to read than all capitals.

Resources that can help you

Books

One of the best books for those interested in developing low literacy materials is *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills*, by Cecilia C. Doak, Leonard G. Doak and Jane H. Root. Published in 1985, this book targets the health field. It covers written materials as well as visuals, oral materials like audiotapes, and pretesting of materials.

For a book that focuses on the social and policy issues around literacy, read *Illiterate America*, by Jonathan Kozol. It provides many examples of the effects of illiteracy.

Reading formulas and computer programs

There are more than 40 formulas that assess the degree of difficulty of written material. Some of the more common ones are *Flesch*. Most look at work difficulty and sentence length. Applying these formulas by hand requires some calculation and time.

There are a few computer programs such as *RightWriter* is a recommended computer software program. It can be found for less than \$100. Remember that computer programs can assess only the readability of written pieces. Other factors such as page setup, type size, and use of illustrations affect how easy the material is to read and understand.

Written materials

There are a few resources that are available to further help you write for those with limited reading skills.

- *Guidelines: Writing for Adults with Limited Reading Skills*, by N. Gaston and P. Daniels is available from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.
- *Writing for Reading: A Guide for Developing Print Materials in Nutrition for Low Literacy Adults*, by S. Nitzke, A. Shaw, S. Pingree, and S. Voichick is available from the University of Wisconsin-Extension. A more detailed bibliography is available from the first author of this brochure.

Community resources

Your local adult basic education (ABE) program, through school districts, conducts ESL (English as a Second Language), GED, and diploma equivalency programs. The staff of these programs have resources or expertise to share. Your university's college of education may have a literacy expert who can advise you.⁷

How are other states developing readable materials?

A 1992 survey of other state Extension services revealed that few of them have the resources to check the readability of all the educational materials they produce. Most of their efforts at keeping reading levels low are in the development of materials geared to youth, EFNEP participants, and special groups like urban gardeners.

It's usually the responsibility of the subject matter specialist, rather than the communications unit, to be sure Extension publications are at appropriate reading levels. Most Extension communications units are not staffed to do extensive editing or rewriting to lower reading levels, but many will provide readability help to authors in other ways.

In a few states, communications specialists or editors assist subject matter specialists by recommending the use of readability tests. Commonly used computer programs are *Grammatik*.

Apparently little formal communications training of Extension campus- and county-based faculty is taking place across the country. Extension staff occasionally offer workshops in clear writing, but few states replying to the survey reported regular efforts in this area. Authors are often encouraged to pilot-test new materials, but few states have an organized way of doing so.

Reference notes

1. Kozol, J. *Illiterate America*, New York; Anchor Press/Doubleday and Co., 1985, p. 26.
2. Minnesota Literacy Training Network. *If I Had Only Known — Connections* 13(6):1,3, 1992.
3. National Council on Patient Information and Education. *Explaining Medication Use: Low Literacy Patients*. Talk About Prescriptions Month: 6, 1988.
4. Ibid.
5. Williams, H., editor, *Minnesota's Adult Learners*. Minnesota Association for Continuing Adult Education, 1989.
6. Hartman, T. *Presentation of NHLBI Project Results*, SNE 25th Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., 1992.
7. At the University of Minnesota, contact Rosemarie J. Park.

Order publications online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/shop/> or call toll-free 800-292-0969.



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