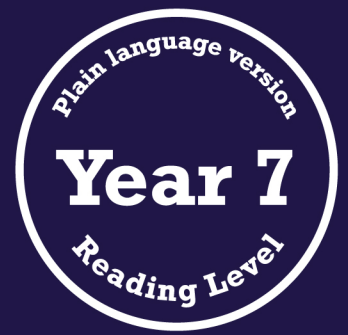




The
**Information
Access**
Group



Submission to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance



Introduction

The Information Access Group agrees with the work the Committee is doing. Looking into the issue of adult literacy in our community is very important. We have read the submissions published so far and want to add to the conversation. Our submission focuses on the need for more accessible information for people with low levels of literacy.

About us

We are a communication business that specialises in accessibility. We believe that information should be accessible to the widest possible audience.

This includes:

- people with disability
- people who speak languages other than English
- First Nations peoples
- older people
- people of all ages with low levels of literacy.

We started our business in 2009. We work with a range of organisations in the government, disability, community and business sectors. We help them connect with their audiences.

Background

The responses that the Committee has received so far highlight how important collecting data and doing further research is. They also discuss the need to develop consistent ways to improve adult literacy skills across Australia. Our submission is different from those already published. Our submission focuses on the need for more accessible information. And how this can improve some of the barriers people in our community face.

What is accessible information?

Accessible information is:

- easy to read and understand
- easy to use with screen readers and other assistive technologies.

In this submission, we focus on making content easy to read and understand.

Who needs accessible information?

A lot of day-to-day information that we use needs high levels of literacy to read and understand. This includes basic information such as:

- application forms
- phone bills
- terms and conditions for a credit card.

The language in these documents can be very complex. And often too complex for many Australians, including people with disability.

This creates barriers to people finding work and taking part in the community.

Of course, we need to support more people to learn literacy skills. But we can also tackle this from a different angle, by making the content itself easier to read in the first place. This helps everyone – including people with high levels of literacy who are busy and need to understand information quickly.

The Australian Government *Style Manual* suggests that organisations write content at a Year 7 level for most Australians. They say: “Content for general consumption needs to be accessible by everyone, regardless of literacy. Specialist content is more accessible for technical users when written in plain language.”

Everyone in our community also has the right to get information in a format that they can understand. Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, all governments in need to provide accessible information about all laws and government programs. And, under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (which Australia signed in July 2008), information must be available in formats that suit the needs of people with disability. The information must also be available quickly and at no extra cost to the person with disability.

It’s important for everyone in our community to be able to access information about the issues that affect them. This includes people having enough information so that they can make informed decisions. This information must also be in a format that suits their needs.

Simpler, more engaging content helps more people to:

- take part in the national conversation
- understand their rights and choices
- learn and take part in education
- seek and find employment
- understand and act on information about health and wellbeing
- get support in crisis and emergency situations
- make more social and community connections.

You can use accessible content in a range of settings, including:

- government
- education
- health
- community and civic life
- employment.

And you can use it for all people, including:

- people who speak languages other than English
- First Nations peoples
- older people
- people with disability
- people who live in rural and remote settings.

How do we make materials easy to read?

There are different ways to make content simpler. Plain language is writing in a straight-forward way that most readers can understand on first reading.

Easy Read takes this a step further. It uses images to support simple text, helping more readers understand the content. When you use text and images together, readers can process the content faster and can better remember and understand the information. The human brain is wired for recognising and processing images.¹

Easy Read is widely used for audiences with a disability. It is also being used more often for adults with low literacy levels, in First Nations communities or where English is an additional language.

¹ Smiciklas, M. (2012). *The Power of Infographics*. Indiana: Que Publishing.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Committee looks at using simplified content as a way to help adults with lower levels of literacy. In the long-term, we must improve literacy and numeracy across our community. In the short-term, we can help people by making content that suits their needs right now. We also recommend that the Committee considers that there will always be a need for accessible communication. Even when adult literacy skills have improved, many people will still benefit from simpler content.

