

21 April 2021

Committee Secretariat
House Standing Committee on Employment,
Education and Training
PO Box 6021
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretariat,

On behalf of the Information Access Group, I am pleased to present this submission and accompanying attachments for consideration to the formal Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance.

By way of background, I am the Founder and Managing Director of the Information Access Group, a communication agency that specialises in audience engagement. We are well known and regarded for our work in assisting organisations to meet the diverse literacy needs of the community and for the high-quality communication products we produce.

Our submission focuses on the need for more accessible information for people with low levels of literacy. We have provided two attachments to emphasise the importance of, and demonstrate best practice for, accessible information:

- Attachment A is a plain language version of this submission, which was written for a Year 7 level.
- Attachment B is an Easy Read version of this submission, which was written for a Year 4 level.

Should the Committee require further information with respect to our submission and attachments, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Lyndall Thomas | Founder and Managing Director

The Information Access Group

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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 commends the Committee on looking into the important issue of adult literacy in our community. We have read the submissions published so far with interest and want to contribute to the conversation. Our submission has an emphasis on the need for more accessible information for people who have low levels of literacy.

About us

The Information Access Group is a communication agency that specialises in accessibility. We believe that information should be accessible to the widest possible audience, including people with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, First Nations peoples, older people and people of all ages with low levels of literacy. Established in 2009, we work with a range of organisations, across sectors such as government, disability, community and business, to help them connect with diverse audiences in meaningful ways.

Background

The rich and varied responses that the Committee has received in submissions to date underlines the importance of data collection and further research. It also emphasises the need for consistent and rigorous approaches to developing literacy skills among adults across Australia. Our submission varies from those already published by focussing on the need for more accessible information as an alternative way to address some of the barriers to inclusion faced by people in our community.

What is accessible information?

Accessible information is:

- easy to read and understand
- easy to use with assistive technologies.

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

Who needs accessible information?

Much of the day-to-day information that demands our attention requires high levels of literacy to read and comprehend. Basic materials, from an application form to a phone bill to a set of terms and conditions for a credit card, use complex language that does not meet the communication needs of many Australians, including people with disability.

This creates barriers to employment and participation in the community.

Of course, we need to support more people to gain literacy. But we can also address 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 time-poor.

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.”

We also note that everyone in our community has the right to receive information in a format that they can understand. Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, all governments in Australia – Commonwealth, state, territory and local – have responsibilities to provide accessible information about all laws and government programs. And, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified by Australia in July 2008), information must be made available in formats that suit the communication needs of people with disability. The information must be available in a timely manner and at no additional cost to the person with disability.

We believe that it is vital for everyone in our community to have access to information about issues that impact them, including a breadth of information that allows decisions to be made in context. Importantly, this information must 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 gain employment
- understand and act on information about health and wellbeing
- get support in crisis and emergency situations
- make more social and community connections.

Accessible content can be used in a range of settings, including:

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

And it can be used 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 methods of making content simpler. Plain language is a well-known approach, 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 gain an understanding of the content. When text and images are used together, readers can process the content faster and have better outcomes for recall and comprehension. The human brain is wired for image recognition and processing.¹

Easy Read is currently used extensively for audiences with a disability. It is also becoming more widely used 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 considers the use of simplified content as a solution to address deficits in adult literacy now. In the long-term, the goals for improving literacy and numeracy across our community must be attained. In the short-term, we can help more people by making content that suits their needs right now. From there, we recommend that the Committee considers that there may always be a need for accessible communication – even with improved literacy outcomes and skills across some cohorts.

