

Make It Clear

Introduction

The National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI), the National Association for Deaf People (NAD) and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) have created common guidelines on producing written information that is accessible to everyone.

Over 10,000 people use the services offered by the NCBI. Of this figure, 82 (eighty two) per cent have some useful vision. If a person is vision impaired, their vision may be blurred, colours can become dulled and they may not see small details. People with vision impairments may also have difficulty scanning text and may be able to see only a small part of an image or text at a time. Some people with low vision can read standard print but it can be slow and exhausting. For these people, written material should be produced in well-designed clear print so that it can read more easily.

About 5,000 people in Ireland are profoundly deaf and use Irish sign language as their first language. This is a distinct language with its own grammar and sentence structure. English (or another language) is the second language of a profoundly deaf sign language user, so written materials need to be clearly worded and presented.

Over half of all Irish adults have less than the required literacy skills to manage everyday work, personal and social tasks; a quarter have significant literacy difficulties. Literacy involves listening and speaking,

reading, writing, numeracy (understanding and using numbers) and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. Literacy difficulties have physical, social and educational causes and affect people in many different ways. In general, however, those with literacy difficulties may find it hard to understand written agreements, instructions or descriptions, fill in application forms or understand timetables. These all need to be presented clearly so they can access their entitlements and fulfil their obligations.

Specific guidelines need to be followed so that the process of reading is as simple as possible for people with low vision, those who use sign language as their first language and those with literacy difficulties. The recommendations in this document will not only help these groups; clear language and layout help everybody access information more easily. With this in mind, the NCBI, NAD and NALA make the following recommendations.

Paper quality and surface

- Use a paper surface with a matt finish to reduce glare and reflection.
- Choose a paper that weighs at least 90 gsm – a little thicker than standard photocopying paper.
- Use ring binding for larger documents so that they can be laid flat for photocopying, scanning and reading with magnification.

Formatting

- Print should be as small or as large as is comfortable for the individual; 'jumbo' large print is not suitable for all.
- In general, use **14 point** font for main text and a larger font size (usually 2 points larger) for headings. Use 18 point for sub headings and 22 font for main headings.
- If a person asks for large print, use **22 point** font or ask the person what font size they require.
- Use plain letters that are easily recognisable. Sans serif is more legible. Avoid decorative letters.
- Use a font type that gives equal space between each letter (known as a mono-spaced font). Arial is an example of plain letter type and mono-spaced font.
- People pick out the shape of a word rather than every single letter when they read. Avoid **underlining** words or putting them in **italics**, as these make it more difficult to recognise their shape.
- Highlight important information using a large font size, bold type or a contrasting colour text.
- Avoid writing a full word in CAPITAL LETTERS, as they distort the word's shape.

- Try not to use too many abbreviations (for example: Building reg's), initialisms (for example: N.C.B.I.) or acronyms (for example: FETAC). If you must use them, always spell them out in full in brackets right afterwards.
- If using bullet points, make sure they are solid and in a contrasting colour.
- *Do not use vertical or curving text.*
- Avoid cramming or stretching letters.
- Do not split words between two lines by using hyphens, as this disrupts the reader's eye movements and understanding of the text.

Numbers and amounts

- The numbers 3, 5 and 8 and, with some fonts, 0 and 6 can be difficult to recognise. Write out the word 'three' or 'eight' or choose a font that has clear numerals.
- Use decimal points only where necessary, as they can be difficult to see.
- If using fractions to describe something, only use those that most people can grasp easily: a half, a quarter, three quarters or one fifth. Other fractions are more difficult, so use a percentage instead – for

example you might say 'about 40 per cent of the population' instead of 'three-eighths of the population'.

Layout

- Always use a consistent layout for each section to make it easier for the reader to find information. Use recurring features, for example headings and page numbers in the same place for each section.
- Make use of white space and headings to provide relief from the text.
- Try to use a vertical line about 5mm to the left of text. This can help a reader using magnification to find the start of each line.
- For longer documents, include a list of contents as a useful navigational aid.

Paragraphs

- Align text to the left, as this makes it easier for the reader to find the beginning of each line and leaves an even amount of space between each word, which makes the text easier to read.
- Avoid justifying text, as it creates uneven, and sometimes large, gaps between words. This can make the text very hard to follow.
- Only use centred text for main headings or titles.

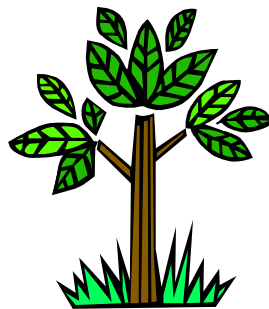
- Space between lines of text should be 1.5 times the space between words on the line. This translates into something like 12pt on 15pt leading and 14pt on 17pt leading.
- Use a margin of 1.5 (one and a half) inches to ensure that the text is not too close to the document's spine.
- Try to use a vertical line about 5mm to the left of text. This can help a reader using magnification to find the start of each line.
- Leave at least one full line between paragraphs. This will divide the text into sections, making it easier to navigate.
- If using columns, leave plenty of space between them so the reader does not jump from one to the next one over. Consider using a thick dark vertical line to separate columns.
- Break up a series of paragraphs with relevant sub-headings or questions and answers.
- Consider bullet point lists to break up long or complicated paragraphs.
- Try not to have a paragraph start on one page and end on the next – either make it more concise or start it on the next page.

Forms

- Some people with low vision use a thick felt tip marker to see and read what they have written. If a reader needs to write on a form, make sure that there is enough space for them to write bigger and to complete the form using a thick marker.
- Create boxes rather than lines for answers. Make answer boxes stand out by having them in a paler colour than other parts of the form.
- Use as many tick-the-box questions as possible. For those with low vision, make sure tick boxes are large enough to see and tick.
- Make sure borders around tick and answer boxes are thick and solid.
- Give clear instructions on how to fill in the form at the start.
- Consider including a checklist if the person needs to send other documents with the form.
- Ask questions as directly as possible and group similar questions together in one part of the form.
- Use headings to divide the sections of a form, for example 'Part 1: Your details'; 'Part 2: Your work history' and so on. See Appendix 1 for an example.

Images

- Images are a useful way to break up text and communicate information. However, only use them to add to the meaning of information outlined in the text.
- Try using images as a navigational aid for people with low vision, for example inserting an image to indicate the beginning of each section.
- Use images and photos with clear edges and good colour contrast. These are easier to see than watercolour images with undefined edges and light, faded colours. The important part of the image should stand out. For example:



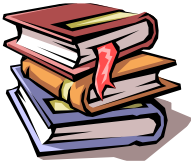
- Avoid images or photographs with too much detail. For example:




- Do not place text over an image, as this will make the text more difficult to read. For example:



- Do not wrap



text around an image,
as it means that each line
starts in
a different place.

- Do not place an image  between columns of text, as it will distract the reader.
- Make sure that images and text work together – images should not be the only way of providing information. For example, if you include a graph, explain its contents in words as well. If you include a map (a useful way to explain a location for people with literacy difficulties) also provide written directions.
- Make sure that images are clearly separate from text and large enough to see – but not so large that they go out of focus.

Colour

- Use colour contrast effectively – this is crucial for people with low vision and literacy difficulties. In general, use a dark colour and a light colour, for example dark text on a light background.
- Choose contrasting colours carefully. Black text on white paper can sometimes give too much reflection and glare, so use a muted colour paper with contrasting colour text, for example navy text on cream paper.
- Use a different colour from that used for the rest of the text to highlight words and sentences.
- Negative text (also known as reverse text) is a light colour text on a dark colour background. Consider using it for headings, titles, names, addresses and page numbers.
- When using negative text, increase the font size and bold the text because a light colour text on a dark background appears smaller. In the example below, you'll see that '10' stands out more in the version on the right.

10

10

- Make sure the contrast in negative text is strong enough. The background colour should be dark enough to provide contrast with the light colour text, as in the second example below.

Ineffective colour contrast

Effective colour contrast

- Use different colour combinations for different sections of a document, for example choose navy and yellow for Chapter One, cream and brown for Chapter Two and so on.
- Avoid switching from negative text to standard text too often, as it can make a document look too busy.

Language

- Use a direct style. Address the reader as 'you' as much as possible and use 'I' or 'we' to refer to yourself or your organisation.
- Write most sentences in the active voice so the reader knows who or what is doing an action. For example, instead of writing 'the request will be considered', say, 'we will consider the request'.
- Avoid using complicated words or business jargon if more familiar words and phrases would do. If you must use specialised terms, define them. Not every reader will be as familiar as you are with the terms you use every day.
- Make sure each paragraph contains only one idea.

- Avoid using unnecessary words and instead consider if you can get the same message across more concisely. For example, use 'because' instead of 'owing to the fact that' or 'about' instead of 'in respect of'.
- Use the English equivalent of Latin and French expressions. Try using 'for example' instead of 'e.g.', 'that is' instead of 'i.e.', and 'such as' before a list instead of 'etc' after it. Also try to use English equivalents of 'pro rata', 'inter alia', 'in lieu', 'vis-à-vis' and similar phrases.
- Use an average of 15 to 20 words in each sentence. Consecutive sentences that are too long or too short will tire the reader's eyes and make it harder for them to follow what you are saying.
- Avoid using nouns instead of verbs, as this makes your writing more indirect. For example, rework your sentences so you write 'consider' instead of 'consideration', 'establish' instead of 'establishment' and 'discuss' instead of 'discussion'.
- Where possible, use the same term for something throughout your document to avoid confusing your reader. For example, if you call something a plan, don't later call it a strategy.

Appendix 1 – Sample of a form

Part 1: Your details

1 What is your name?

First name

Last name

2 What is your address?

<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>

4 What is your telephone number?

Home

Work

5 Do you live alone?

Yes

No

6 How many children do you have?

1 or 2

3 or more

Appendix 2

Checklist for NCBI

Ways to make written material accessible to all

Font size and type

- Is the font size at least 14 point or above?
- Is the font type plain and clear?
- Are the numerals clear and easy to recognise?
- Is a larger font size used for titles, headings and negative text? (Negative text is dark background and light colour text).
- Are decimal points used only where necessary?

Colour contrast

- Does the text contrast with the background colour?
- Is negative text used for titles, headings and page numbers?
- Is colour used to highlight keywords and headings?
- Is colour used to divide sections?

Formatting

- Is the main text in upper and lower case?
- Are CAPS only used for single words?
- Is underlining and italics avoided?
- Is colour, bold or a larger font size used to highlight keywords or headings?
- Are the index and contact details in bold?
- Is splitting words between two lines avoided?
- Is curved or vertical text avoided?
- Is all main text left aligned?
- Is central alignment only used for titles?
- Are sentences kept short? Use an average of 15 to 20 words in each sentence.
- Is there is adequate space between each line? Consider using one and a half line spacing.
- Is there even spacing between each letter and each word? Words should not be stretched or crammed.
- Is there a space between each paragraph?
- Are columns of text clearly separate from each other?
- If using columns, is there a thick vertical line between them?
- Are bullet points solid and bold?

Consistent layout

- Is the layout the same for each section?
- Are recurring features used? For example, telephone number first, fax second and email third.
- Are page numbers in the same place on each page?
- Is the layout and design clear?
- Is there a contents list?
- **Are the contact details and index on the first or last page?**

Images

- Are the images used clear and simple with good contrasting colours?
- If using images, are they separate from the text?
- Is text over images avoided?
- Are watermarks behind text avoided?
- Is wrapping text around images avoided?
- Have you ensure that images are not the only way of providing information?

Forms

- If the reader needs to write on the page, is there is adequate space to use a big thick marker?
- If using check boxes or tables, is the border is solid and bold?

Printing

- Does the paper have a matt finish?
- Do folds on the paper obscure the text?
- Are larger documents ring bound, so that they can be flattened for magnification?

Large print

The type size requirement varies with individuals. “Jumbo” large print is not suitable for all. Print size should be as small as is comfortable for the individual.

- Are company letters and publications in 14 point font size?
- Is 22 point font size used where large print is requested?

Appendix 3



Checklist for NALA Plain English Mark

Twenty questions on your document

This checklist offers a quick way for you to review a document, such as a letter, report or information leaflet, to see whether it is in plain English. Some questions may not apply, but aim to answer 'yes' to as many of the others as possible.

Language, punctuation and grammar

- 1 Does it use 'you' and 'we'?
- 2 Does it use the active voice most of the time?
- 3 Does it keep jargon to a minimum?
- 4 Does it explain any specialised terms in clear language?
- 5 Does it define acronyms and other abbreviations?
- 6 Does it use terms in a consistent way?
- 7 Does it cut out unnecessary words and details?
- 8 Does it have an average of 15 to 20 words in each sentence?
- 9 Does it use correct punctuation?
- 10 Does it use the simplest verb tense possible?
- 11 Does it avoid nominalisations (nouns made normally from verbs)?
- 12 Does it avoid Latin and French phrases and Latin abbreviations?

Structure

- 13 Does it keep paragraphs reasonably short?
- 14 Does it use informative headings or questions to break up long text?
- 15 Does it use bullet point lists for detailed or complicated information?
- 16 Does it organise information according to the reader's needs?

17 Does it include a natural flow from one point to the next?

Page design

18 Does it use a readable typeface (font and size)?

19 Does it avoid underlining, groups of capital letters and italicised phrases?

20 Does it align paragraphs to the left and use at least 1.5 spacing?

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For more information, contact NALA at literacy@nala.ie or on

Tel: 01 855 4332.

Further information

Publications

- Access to Information for All, Comhairle (2005)
- First Steps in Producing Accessible Publications, National Disability Authority (2005)

Organisations

National Council for the Blind of Ireland Whitworth Road Drumcondra Dublin 9	Tel: 01 830 7033 Fax: 01 830 7787 Email: info@ncbi.ie Web: www.ncbi.ie
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