

# *Am I making myself clear?*

*Mencap's guidelines for accessible writing*



Thank you for your interest in 'Am I making myself clear'. I hope you find these guidelines helpful.

### **Why you should think about accessible information**

There are nearly 1.5 million people with learning disabilities living in the UK.

Changes in policy and legislation, and a change in attitudes, mean these people no longer live in long-stay hospitals and other institutions. They are part of the community, needing information and services.

### **Requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act**

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) makes it unlawful for service providers to discriminate against disabled people.

It applies to nearly all service providers, including local councils, Government departments, charities, hotels and restaurants, shops and leisure facilities, accountants and solicitors, churches, courts, hospitals and clinics.

### **How can Mencap help?**

Mencap is the UK's leading organisation working with people with a learning disability. The Mencap Accessibility Unit has expertise in breaking down information into understandable concepts and language.

### **We can provide:**

- general advice on accessibility for people with a learning disability
- editing and writing of accessible material
- focus groups where people with a learning disability can provide detailed feedback on your documents or your services.

### **How to contact the Accessibility Unit**

 020 7696 6965 or 020 7696 5551

 Email [accessibility@mencap.org.uk](mailto:accessibility@mencap.org.uk)

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# *Contents*

Making ourselves clear	2
First steps towards accessibility	4
Using plain English	6
Using layout and design	8
Using symbols, drawings and photos	10
Using technology to make ourselves clear	15
Examples	16
More information about accessible writing and images	28

# *Making ourselves clear*

## **Introduction**

We all want and need information, but people with a learning disability face extra challenges in getting the information they need. Changing the way we write and present information can make it easier for everyone to understand.

At Mencap we are working with people with learning disabilities and other organisations to find out how we can make information more accessible. We do not have all the answers, and are still learning from our mistakes, but we are starting to make ourselves clearer.

## **Key points**

Many people find reading difficult. They may prefer to get information on audio tape or face to face. If you have to provide written material there are ways to make it easier to understand. You can:



Use clear and simple text (plain English) with short sentences, simple punctuation and no jargon.



Use larger print (at least 12 point), a clear typeface and plenty of spacing.



Use bullet points or story boxes and fact boxes to make the main points clear.

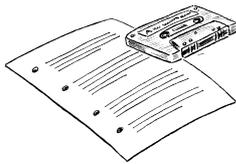


Use images such as photos, drawings or symbols to support your text. Aim to make the subject of your material clear at a glance, even to a non-reader.



Do not rely heavily on abstract symbols unless you know your readers are confident symbol users. Choose one or two simple, pictorial symbols and put them to the side of the words.

## Using technology



Important information may need to be available on audio tape or video. Keep tapes short. Always say when to turn the tape over and when it ends.



If you send emails remember that formatting can be lost. This can make material harder to understand.

# *First steps towards accessibility*

## **Knowing your audience**

Thinking about your intended audience, and its abilities and needs, is the key to producing accessible information.

## **Relevant information**

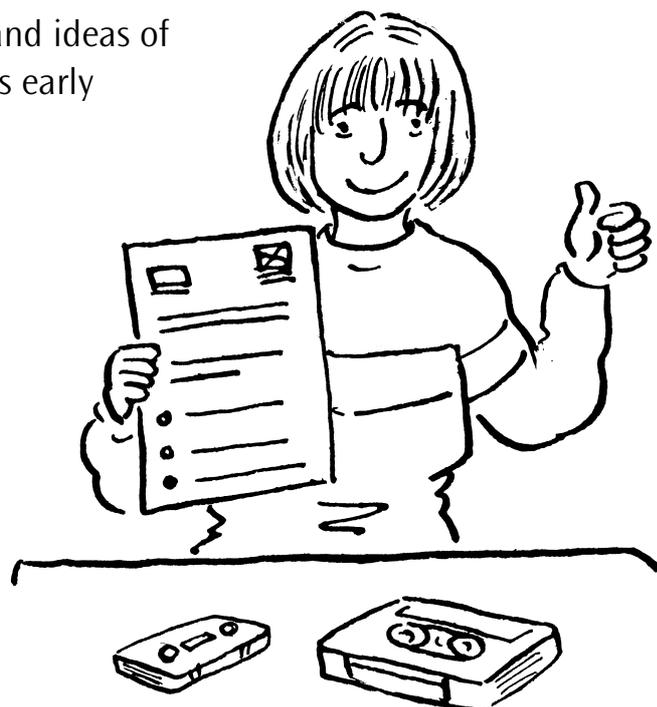
Ask what information is relevant to your intended audience. Cut out any confusing or unnecessary detail, while making sure the essential information is very clear. Always use plain English.

## **Remember that you are writing for adults**

If the words or pictures that you use are inappropriately childish they will meet no-one's needs. But if you do the job well you may find that everyone prefers the "accessible" version.

## **Involve your audience**

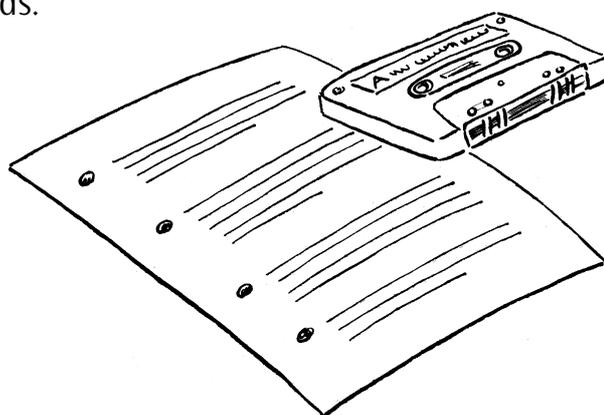
Wherever possible involve your audience in the creative process. Seek the advice and ideas of people with learning disabilities as early as possible.



## Be prepared to 'do whatever it takes'

When Mencap asked people for ideas on making information more accessible, this was a phrase often used. 'Doing whatever it takes' means using a variety of formats to get across your message.

- The same information can be written, on audio tape and on video.
- Take time to find the words, pictures or photos that best support and explain your message.
- Sometimes you may not be able to find the image you need, and may need to draw pictures or take photographs yourself. Although material for large or external audiences must meet certain standards, when you are working with individuals or small groups not everything has to be slick and professional to work. You can also make your own audio and video tapes.
- Provide aids for supporters of people with a learning disability. Large photographs, drawings and overhead transparencies can aid understanding in discussions. During the recent Mencap National Assembly elections, props such as hand made ballot boxes were used in group discussions. Seek advice from supporters and professionals who are familiar with your client's needs.



# *Using plain English*

Uncomplicated language makes writing easier to understand for everyone. The use of plain English is a minimum standard for all Mencap written material.

## **Plan what you want to say**

Cut out the unnecessary detail and present the important information in a logical sequence, one step at a time.

## **Try to write as you speak**

Don't use jargon, unnecessary technical detail or abbreviations. If you need to use difficult words, include a 'dictionary' or 'list of useful words' to explain them.

## **Keep sentences short**

If you remember to have only one main idea per sentence this will happen naturally. See if any sentences using commas or joined with 'and' could be broken in two.

## **Use simple punctuation**

Avoid semicolons(;), colons (:), hyphens (-) or sentences broken up with too many commas.



## **Use active and personal language**

Talk to your readers directly using active and personal language. Using “you” and “we” makes your writing more direct and understandable.

## **Be consistent**

For important concepts, use the same words and phrases consistently even if it sounds repetitive. Don't begin writing about 'the delegates' before using different words, such as 'attendees' or 'participants', to describe the same thing.

## **Use the number and not the word**

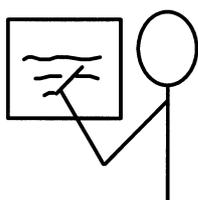
If you are writing largely for people with a learning disability, always use the number and not the word even for small numbers. Use 3 instead of 'three'. Try not to use percentages or large numbers. You could say 'a few' instead of 7% and 'many' instead of 1,552.

## **Make it clear what action is required**

Bristol Pathway (a Mencap employment service) always puts a symbol on written material it sends out:



material that is just for information



a reply is needed

## *Using layout and design*

How we present our writing is as important as what it says. A page of dense typescript is off-putting for everyone.

- Use larger print. If your audience includes a reasonable number of people with learning disabilities the type should be at least 12 point, with the most important information in 14 point.
- Use a clear typeface such as Arial or Univers and avoid ornate fonts. *Fancy and ornate fonts are much harder to read than plainer fonts.*
- Make sure there is good contrast between type and paper. This is especially true if using coloured paper. Avoid yellow type. Avoid reverse type (white out of a colour).
- Use good quality matt paper. The writing on the other side won't show through, and there won't be a glare to make it hard to read.
- Do not run writing over the top of a photo or drawing.
- Avoid block capitals, italics or underlining. They all make text harder to read. Use sentence case and highlight important points with bolding.
- Use a ragged right edge rather than justified.



- Do not break up words with a hyphen at the end of a line.
- Always start and finish a sentence on the same page. Don't let articles run onto another page.
- Break the text into short chunks with plenty of white space around it.
- Keep the line length short. Running across the width of an A3 page is too long.
- Bullets and boxes. Use bullet points and fact boxes to make the main points clear.
- Provide clear contents lists and section headings.
- Write all addresses as they appear on an envelope, not on one line separated by commas:

Lynn Grieveson  
123 Golden Lane  
London EC1Y 0RT

- Keep the layout consistent for a regular publication. Try to put similar articles in the same place or page each issue.
- Consider using a larger A3 format. It can feel friendlier and lets you use larger print and images.
- Use images to support your text (see over for more information on this).

## *Using symbols, drawings and photos*

Supporting plain English text with images is one of the best ways to make writing easier to understand as well as more attractive.

### **Choose the image which best explains your text**

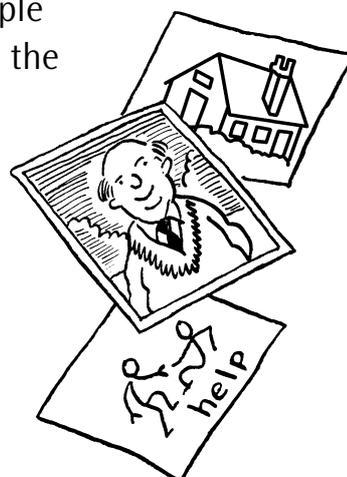
It could be a photograph, drawing or symbol. Within the same document you may need to use a photo you have scanned in yourself, some line drawings, and some common symbols. (By symbols, we mean Rebus, PCS and other stylised drawings available on Wigit<sup>®</sup> software. Symbols can be consistently reproduced by anyone with access to the same software).

### **Link together words and pictures**

Make it clear which part of the text each image relates to. Usually this is by placing the image alongside the text. Some people like to use an image for each main idea or paragraph. It is important that images help explain the text and are not just there to make the material 'look accessible'.

### **Don't use too many symbols**

Don't rely heavily on symbols unless you know the people receiving your material are confident symbol users. See the next page for more ideas on using symbols.

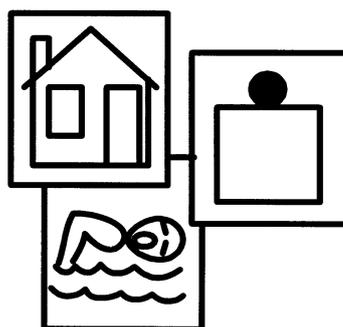


## Using symbols

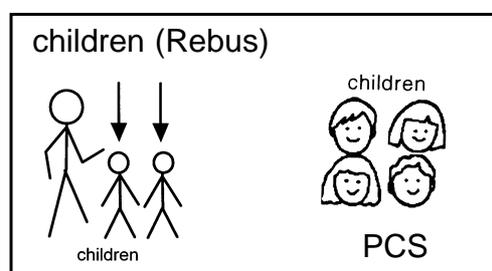
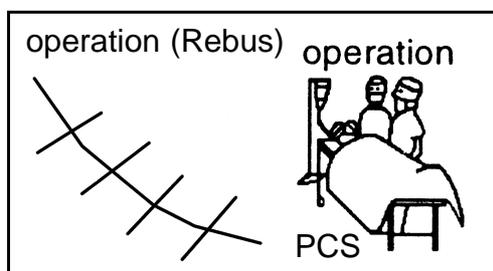
You can use computer software, such as Writing with Symbols 2000<sup>®</sup> (Widgit) to add symbols to your writing. This software lets you type in a word, and a symbol will appear above it.



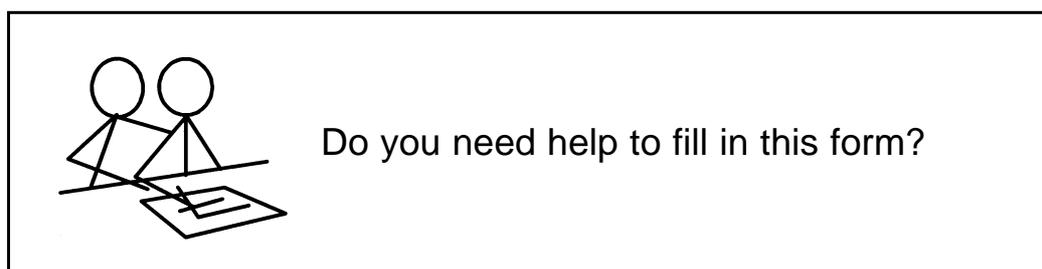
- Some people find too many symbols on a page confusing. Unless you know your readers like symbols above most words, it is better to use symbols just for key words or ideas.
- At present there are relatively few adults with a learning disability who are confident symbol users. The situation will change as more people learn symbols at school and college, where they are used as a literacy development tool. You need to learn how to ‘read’ symbols, and also how to use them properly. Symbols can be as meaningless as an unknown foreign language if you are unfamiliar with them.
- If someone writes to you in symbols, try to use them in your reply. It takes practice and training to use symbols effectively. The first step is always to write a clear message using plain English.
- At Mencap we use a symbol if it is the clearest image we can find.



- Don't just use the first symbol you find. For example, PCS symbols are also on the Writing with Symbols 2000<sup>®</sup> software and are more illustrative than the Rebus symbols. A PCS symbol is often more easily understood.



- We use symbols to illustrate the key words or ideas, and place them alongside the text rather than above the words. We do not place them above words unless we know our readers use them this way.



- Explaining complicated concepts will often be easier with a drawing or photo. Common or obvious symbols (such as toilet, meal time, no smoking) are useful for signs and timetables.

***Remember: Do not rely heavily on symbols unless you know your readers are confident symbol users.***

## Using drawings

A good drawing can convey more information than a symbol, or even than a photo with too much irrelevant detail in it.

- Drawings can also show people from different cultures, or people with multiple disabilities.



Drawings can be more difficult than symbols because they are more detailed.

- What some people like, others don't like.

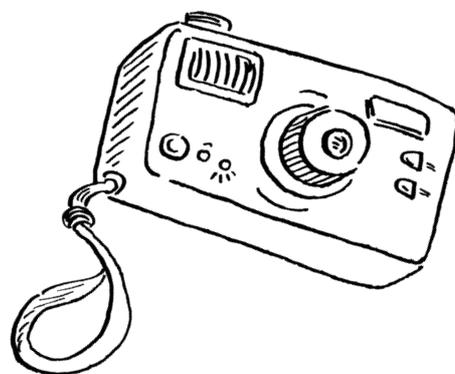


- It can be hard to produce drawings which are attractive and simple, but not too childish and patronising.
- The best drawings are often the simplest. Artists sometimes produce drawings that are too 'busy'. They have shading which can make them hard to see when made smaller, and have too much extra detail which is confusing.

## Using photos

Photos were the most popular kind of image with the readers Mencap spoke with.

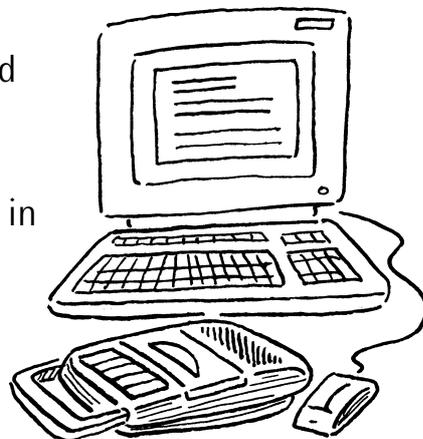
- A photo can carry a lot of information and be very easy to ‘read’.
- Photos of people (especially of faces) catch the eye.
- If you are writing about a specific building or person, a photo will aid recognition and understanding.
- Many people put a photo of the writer at the end of a letter or article.
- Sometimes photos can be too ‘specific’, which can be confusing. You also have to be very careful when you show recognisable people. You should always ask their permission.
- Photos in colour or with lots of detail do not photocopy well.



## *Using technology to make ourselves clear*

Many people prefer to get information on audio tape, CD or video.

- Tapes and CDs are accessible for people who do not read. You can stop the tape or CD and go over something you did not understand.
- Keep tapes short.
- Always say when to turn the tape over, and when it ends.
- Be consistent when you say numbers, such as telephone numbers. Say zero instead of 'oh'. For example, in phone numbers, say zero-eight-zero-zero instead of oh-eight-oh-oh.
- Meeting minutes can be recorded on audio or video tape.
- If someone communicates with you by tape, try to record your reply on tape.
- Many people with learning disabilities are confident using computers, but if you send emails remember they can lose formatting and become harder to understand.
- Provide aids and props for supporters to use in discussions with people with a learning disability. Examples are large photographs, overhead transparencies and objects to pick up and feel.



## *Examples*

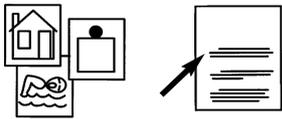
- A report from a Bristol Pathway service users' conference. Page 17
- A letter from Bristol Pathway (employment service) using Rebus symbols and a scanned photograph. Page 18
- Part of Mencap National Assembly election booklet. Page 19
- Part of The Disability Rights Commission's "Who we are" leaflet. Page 22
- A poor invitation using Rebus symbols placed above words. The symbols are not used selectively. Page 24
- The same invitation also using Rebus symbols. The symbols illustrate the key words and are placed alongside the text. Page 25
- A letter in small type using complex language. Page 26
- The same letter using simpler language supported by hand-drawn pictures and Webdings symbols (available on Word 95 or higher). Page 27



## What is the best way to use symbols?



We also asked people about using symbols. We wanted to know what would make it easier to understand the things we write. People said that:



They preferred fewer symbols, put down the side.



Having a photo of the person writing is a good idea.



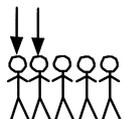
A Pathway logo would help recognise the letter.  
Better than the Mencap logo.

## ABC

We should always use simple writing, words that are familiar.

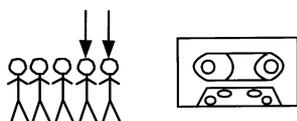


We should have an information symbols or a reply symbol on every letter.



**Big Print**

Some people need big print.

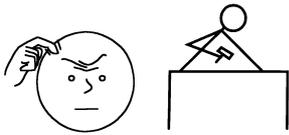


Some people need a tape.



Information  
only

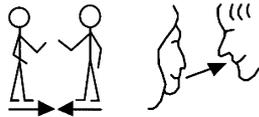
Dear Sarah



You may remember that Pathway is a service which helps people with learning difficulties to find paid jobs.



Please find enclosed an Introduction to the Pathway Employment Service. This explains the services we provide and what we expect from you.



I would like to meet you and talk about what you would like to do. I am also happy to talk to any carers or other people who you are involved with.



I will telephone you within the next week to arrange an appointment to come and see you.



If you have any questions about this please phone me on 0117 955 9219.

Yours sincerely

Steve Short  
Assistant Pathway Officer

# Be a representative on Mencap's National Assembly

## This book is about:

- The National Assembly
- What a National Assembly representative does
- What sort of person a representative needs to be
- Voting
- How to become a candidate in the election



### **Need support?**

Mencap wants everyone to have the opportunity to take part in the elections. If you need support to go through this book, take it to your local group or see the Mencap Membership Helpline number below.

**MENCAP membership helpline 0845 60 40 600**

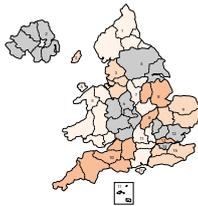
## The National Assembly



The National Assembly is a group of 54 people. They are representatives.



45 will be elected by Mencap members.



3 will come from each Mencap sector. There are 15 sectors in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.



At least 1 in 3 representatives will have a learning disability.

**MENCAP**  
*Understanding learning disability*

5 representatives will be Royal Society Mencap staff.

4 others will be the Trustees and the Chair who are not elected by the National Assembly.

## What will the National Assembly do?

Elect Trustees.

Advise the Trustees on the things Mencap should do.

Talk about important things that affect people with a learning disability, their families and carers, like:



- Campaigning



- Education



- Work



- Housing



- Health



- Gateway and leisure activities

**The law says disabled people should be treated fairly.  
For example, you should be treated fairly when you:**

Want to go to school or college



Need transport



Go to the doctor or hospital



Want a job

Rent or buy a house or flat



Buy something in a shop or restaurant

We also want to teach people about disability  
and how to treat disabled people better.  
We want to change the way they think about  
disabled people.



## What we do

**The Commission's job is to make sure disabled people know their rights.**



If someone has discriminated against you we will help you get it put right.

We might ask the person to sit down with you and talk through the problem.



Sometimes we take people to court for treating a disabled person unfairly.

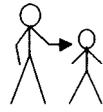
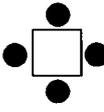


Even if the law has not been broken we can still help you. We can tell you where to go for more information. We can tell you about other groups who can help you sort out your problems.

**We also want to make sure other people know about the law against discrimination.**



We will teach employers and people who provide services about treating disabled people fairly.

       **mencap**  
Would you like to find out more about Mencap?

**I**       **an**      
I would like to invite you to an information day where you

    **a**  **>**  
can find out about becoming a member of Mencap.

   **a**     
For only £1 a year you can:



\* influence the future of the organisation;

        
\* stand for election to the new National Assembly;

        
\* vote in elections to choose Assembly representatives.

   **-**   **23**     
The information day is on July 23 at Cleartown Town Hall.

      **+**    
You can drop in any time between 10am and 2pm. You can

      
call me on 01234 567 89 for more details.



## *Mencap information day*

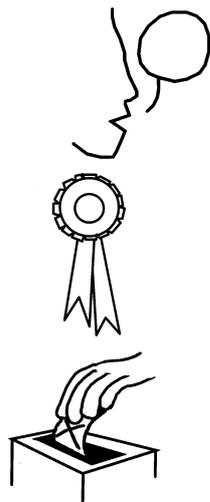


Find out about joining Mencap.

Mencap works with people with a learning disability, their families and carers.



Mencap fights for equal rights for people with a learning disability.



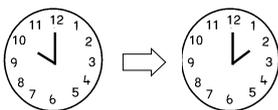
If you are a Mencap member you can

- have a say in what Mencap does
- stand for election to the new National Assembly
- vote in elections to choose National Assembly representatives.

**Come to the Mencap information day**

**23 July Cleartown Town Hall**

**10am until 2pm**



Telephone 01234 567 89 for more information



Bedfordshire Social Research Group  
Max William Day Centre  
22 Clarity Street  
Cleartown  
CL2 5SA

23 May 2000

John Fuse  
17 Confusion Street  
Cleartown  
CL2 4FU

Dear John,

Further to our telephone conversation of 18 May, I would like to invite you to take part in a discussion group on 10 June on the subject of local transport services.

The meeting will take place at this day centre, and will cover the current provision of transport services as well as services users' views on how transport needs could be better met.

The meeting will start at 10am, and is unlikely to last more than two hours.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to seeing you at the meeting.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lee Clear".

Lee Clear  
Assistant researcher

23 May 2000

Dear John

## Transport in Bedfordshire



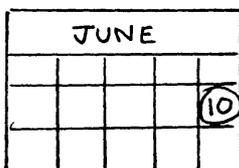
When we spoke on the telephone last week I asked if you wanted to come to a meeting. At the meeting we will talk about local transport services.



I want to know about the buses, taxis or trains you use.



What problems do you have getting around?  
How could your transport be better?



The meeting is on

**10 June**

It starts at **10am**

It will finish at **11.30am**



Come to:

**Max William Day Centre**

**22 Clarity Street**

**Clartown**

There is a map on the next page.

I will telephone you next week to see if you are coming.



If you have any questions, please call me.

Yours sincerely

**Lee Clear**

 01234 567 89

## *More information about accessible writing and images*

'Access First: a guide on how to give written information for people with learning difficulties' by *People First*. ☎ 020 7485 6660

'The Informability Manual' by *Wendy Gregory*, HMSO. ISBN 0-11-702038-9

'Literacy Through Symbols: Improving Access for Children and Adults' by *Tina and Mike Detheridge*, David Fulton Publishers. ISBN 1-85346-483-X

'Writing with Symbols 2000' by *Widgit Software Ltd*. ☎ 01223 425 558.  
[www.widgit.com](http://www.widgit.com)

'Make it Simple: European Easy-to-Read Guidelines', ILSMH European Association. ISBN 2-930078-09-X. [www.inclusion-europe.org](http://www.inclusion-europe.org)

'Plain Facts: information about research for people with learning difficulties' by *Ruth Townsley and Karen Gyde*, *Norah Fry Research Centre, Bristol University*. ☎ 0117 923 8137. [www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/NorahFry](http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/NorahFry)

'Plain English Guide' by *Martin Cutts*, Oxford £3.99. ISBN 0-19-866243-2.

'Making ourselves clear: Mencap's minimum standards for accessible writing' (leaflet), *Mencap*. ☎ 020 7696 5551.

'Picture Bank' by *Change*. ☎ 020 7639 4312. [www.changepeople.co.uk](http://www.changepeople.co.uk)

Plain English Campaign ☎ 01663 744 409. [www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk)

Do you have comments or ideas to share on accessibility?

*Please contact:*  
Accessibility Unit  
Mencap  
123 Golden Lane  
London EC1Y 0RT  
Telephone 020 7696 5551  
Email [accessibility@mencap.org.uk](mailto:accessibility@mencap.org.uk)



[www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk)

Learning Disability Helpline 0808 808 1111