

Serving Families with Low Literacy Adults

People with low literacy skills have **always** been part of our audience. The National Adult Literacy Survey estimates that nearly half of the general public may have low literacy skills. They've always needed their information presented clearly, plainly, and simply so they can succeed in understanding and using it.

When writing for parents with low literacy skills:

- Make it easy to read: Use common words and shorter sentences.
- Make it look easy to read: A simple layout with lots of white space, type that is large enough to be easily read, and headings that provide visual cues about the content will be less intimidating.
- Include only what's important: Because of the extra effort required, you should only cover information they need to know, not what's nice to know. Focus first on actions the user should do.



Adapted from The Audience You Didn't Know You Had by Angela Colter for use at the 2015 Ready to Read at New York Libraries: Early Childhood Public Library Staff Development Program. Image from Openclipart.org.

How to Spot Adults with Low Literacy Skills

Tips from © Literacy Foundation, 2008.

Characteristics

Illiterate individuals are of all ages and social conditions. Out of pride, they will hide their difficulty reading, writing, and counting but will often compensate with powerful observation skills and resourcefulness, along with a remarkable memory. In our society, they are powerless and marginalized.

Observing one of these characteristics in a person may mean they perhaps have trouble reading and writing:

- Saying one cannot read because one has forgotten or lost one's eyeglasses or one's eyes are aching.
- Saying one cannot write because of an aching arm, hand, etc.
- Saying one will read an information sheet later, without taking the time to take a quick look at it.
- Never seeming to understand documents received, even the simplest ones.
- Having trouble signing one's name, dialing a phone number, or completing a form.
- Memorizing information (time and location of a meeting, tasks to be performed, etc.) instead of writing it down.
- Taking practical notes using simple drawings as a reminder (e.g., drawing a \$ sign to remember to bring the money for one's contribution).
- Avoiding tasks where one has to read and write; finding good reasons not to have to do so.

What to do?

Never confront a person you suspect of being illiterate by forcing him to carry out an activity where he will have to read or write. He is likely to close in on himself and avoid any contact with you. Instead, elicit his interest in activities where he will become aware of his difficulties. Help him discover that he is not the only one with this problem – that specialized resources exist, most of the time without charge – to help him and that he can successfully undertake literacy training.

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