

Do your word choices include, or exclude?

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To communicate effectively, both parties need a shared system that enables them to create shared meaning. Effective communication supports participation, enjoyment, and inclusion. This article focuses on the words we choose when we write content to communicate information to the public. It may be anything from a fact sheet about a health condition, to a brochure about a leisure opportunity. However, the same principles also apply when adults and their supporters select words and phrases for use in communication systems. The question we consider is: which words best support participation and inclusion?

At Access Easy English, we write information for the 44 percent of Australian adults who have low literacy. Easy English is also for the other 56 percent: any person can struggle to understand complex written information in times of emergency, trauma, stress and ill health. Easy English uses words the reader already knows to communicate new ideas. This enables readers to understand new information, and apply that knowledge to their lived experience.

Easy English doesn't use technical words, like dysphagia, palliative or restrictive practice. However, there are many other words—such as abuse, risk, or wellbeing—that may be shorter or more common, but still carry a wide range of complex meanings. For many readers, these words function as technical terms as well. We need to explain their meaning, rather than assume the reader understands what we intend.

Some words may seem simple to a fluent reader, but place a high cognitive load on readers with low literacy. These readers may stumble over words such as already, employer, resident, or support. They may not be sure what they mean, and may avoid trying to read them altogether.

What makes a word hard?

A reader with low literacy has limited phonics knowledge and difficulty decoding words. Words are even harder to decode when they are long, have non-standard spelling, contain uncommon phonemes, or are morphologically complex. The reader may know the meaning of this word when they hear it, but they can't read it. Like electricity.

Some words are hard to understand, even if the reader can decode them. The word funds may be easy to read, but a reader with low literacy has limited opportunities to expand their vocabulary, so they may not know it. We need to use words our readers use in their daily life. Just say money!

When you have low literacy, you are also likely to have limited general knowledge. Understanding the meaning of many words requires background knowledge. Readers with low literacy have not had the same opportunities to acquire this background knowledge. What are rights? What is accessibility? What does it mean to have wellbeing?

There are many English words which have different meanings, even when spelled the same. Like markets, or mean. Readers with low literacy are more likely to know the more concrete meaning for these words. Markets are where you go to buy your fruit and vegetables, not the breadth of providers available to people using the NDIS. Mean is a person who is nasty, not a mathematical average, or verb for what things signify.

We learn the meaning of words by hearing and seeing them being used in context, in our environment. If words in a text are words we do not hear in our environment, we are less likely to connect the sound of a word with how it looks written out, and know its meaning.

As writers of public information, we need to make decisions about which words to use, and what concepts to unpack. Unfortunately, most writers of public information make these decisions based on assumptions that are out of line with what the general public needs, let alone people with low literacy.

When you make an assumption that this concept isn't hard to grasp, or that everyone knows this word, are you being ableist?

When you make an assumption that a technical or hard word is important to include—that we all need to be able to read and understand this word before we can engage or participate—are you being ableist?

Why do you use hard words?

Have you considered why you choose hard words, and whether they are necessary?

Some words may be common jargon in your sector. This is useful professional shorthand for people in the same field, with the same elite knowledge. But for people outside of this field, without this shared knowledge, these words are meaningless.

You may choose hard words because of:

- Precision and nuance. Some hard words help convey specific meaning, but is this relevant to your audience? Like knowing a chemist is more properly called a pharmacist.
- Status and legitimacy. Technical and hard words, often used with complex syntax, make the writer or institution appear authoritative. Is this more important than your reader's right to understand and participate?
- Bureaucratic carryover. Public-facing documents are often produced based on internal ones, and the original phrasing may be left in, rather than adapting the content to suit the audience's needs. We all need to take the time to consider the audience's needs, instead of simply copying and pasting.
- Literacy blind spots. Producers of public information are often people with university level education and high-level literacy. They overestimate their audience's reading skills and general knowledge.
- Time and space constraints. Explaining complex words using simpler language often requires many pages of text and multiple examples. Writers may deem some words "impossible" to simplify and leave them in. This shifts the burden to the reader—or their support person—to figure out the meaning, or they may skip the content altogether.
- Euphemism or softening. Many producers of public information prefer to avoid difficult topics by using words like pass away instead of die, suicide instead of kill yourself, mechanical restraint instead of we strap you to a chair. I wonder, who does that serve?
- Perceptions of respect and dignity. Some groups ask for language that feels less stigmatising, like support instead of help or older individuals instead of old people. In our experience, for people with low literacy, the need to read and understand the text comes above these concerns. An easier word enables their understanding, and this is more empowering than using a subtly respectful word they cannot read.

- Gatekeeping. Access to systems is often conditional on knowing the right word: appeal, discrimination, consent, arrears. This gatekeeping disproportionately excludes people with low literacy and disability from realising their rights.
- Spin. Harder words may be chosen not for clarity but for persuasion, framing, or impression management. For example, an organisation may not want to promise they will fix the problem, only that they will resolve your complaint.

Why do hard words persist in public information, even when we know they exclude people?

Because they serve the needs of the writer or institution, not because they serve the reader's need for clarity, access, and taking action.

Learning hard words

The idea that people must learn hard words because "that's how the system works" values bureaucratic literacy over lived needs. This is ableist, and denies people's right to communicate in their own way.

It has also been suggested to us that people need to learn hard or technical vocabulary in order to continue building their knowledge.

"If you take all the hard words out of public information, people won't have the chance to learn important vocabulary".

"You need to know these words to access the system, so it's best that you learn them".

Some people may want to learn new words. But learning these words should not be a prerequisite for access and inclusion. Would you say: "Sometimes there won't be a ramp, so it's best to learn to use the stairs", or "Ramps rob people of a learning opportunity. People need to practice using the stairs!" We know that sometimes, a certain word is necessary to navigate a system. For example, booking an annual health assessment for people with intellectual disability requires using that exact term, or you may not get the right appointment.

In Easy English, when we need to include a word like this, we first unpack the concept using words the reader already knows. We then write something like, "The doctor calls this an annual health assessment. You must say the words annual health assessment [when you book in]". This gives the reader the word they need to get past gatekeepers and achieve the result they need. We do not use the word "annual health assessment" over and over in the content, forcing the reader to struggle each time to read these hard words, when "your health check" gets the job done.

Do your words include - Continued

But our question is: why should the burden of adaptation fall on people with low literacy or complex communication needs, rather than on the system? Why should access and participation be conditional on mastering specialised vocabulary? Why are our words important, and the reader's known words not good enough?

Effective communication

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care describes effective communication as "person-centred" and "tailored, open, honest and respectful" (ACSQHC, 2025).

When our goal is to ensure our listener understands our speech, it is our job to alter our communication to suit their needs. We may simplify, slow down, or clarify when talking to someone with less shared knowledge or different linguistic ability. Failing to do so signals distance or power assertion (Giles, 2016). Public information is full of words most of us do not use in our daily life. Is this effective communication?

When you know your audience includes people with low literacy, are you tailoring your communication effectively when you use hard words? Are you being open and honest when you use words that obscure your meaning? Are you being respectful, when you demand the audience learn your words, rather than conveying the information using words they already understand?

When one person has specialist knowledge, like a doctor, lawyer, or public servant, and the other doesn't, the responsibility is on the powerful communicator to bridge the gap. Expecting the less powerful person to "learn your language" is not only unrealistic, it is ableist, reinforces power imbalances, and asserts authority at the expense of the other person's right to understand the information. Nobody gets to the end of their day and says, "I wish everything was harder to read".

Effective communication is about using words that people actually use in their daily lives. It shifts the responsibility to the communicator, not the reader, and ensures everyone can access, understand, and participate.

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AGOSCI In Focus is AGOSCI's magazine that comes out two times a year.

We publish papers by people with complex communication needs, family members, therapists, and other interested people.

Our next edition will be coming out in June, 2026. The theme is CHOICE.

I will welcome other contributions.

I welcome a Click Tips contribution.

Contact agosciinfocus@agosci.org.au to discuss your idea

1 www.agosci.org.au/In-Focus-Magazine

References

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