

Opening Doors



A Literacy Audit Tool Kit for Customer Service Excellence

Who is the literacy audit for?

Are you a:

- Business
- Social service agency
- Community organization
- Government department
- Someone who works with the general public?

Then *Opening Doors: A Literacy Audit Tool Kit for Customer Service Excellence* is for you.

Nearly half of Canadians may have trouble accessing the services you provide because of their low literacy skills. They will have difficulty with the kinds of daily literacy activities many take for granted:

- Reading posters, pamphlets, bills, or business letters
- Filling out forms
- Understanding written instructions
- Using maps to find directions

Why do a literacy audit?

Think of the print materials, application and admission procedures, and advertising your organization uses. What reading, number, and problem solving skills are needed to understand and use your services?

According to the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS):

- 47.7% of adult Canadians over the age of 16 struggle with reading
- 59.8% of recent immigrants (up to 10 years in Canada) also struggle with reading
- 55.1% of adult Canadians over the age of 16 have difficulty using numbers
- 72.2% of adult Canadians over the age of 16 find problem solving troublesome

If you work with the general public, chances are that the literacy demands of your organization raise barriers for some clients.

Opening Doors will give you effective methods to continuously improve your customer service and eliminate barriers for all of your clients.

What is a literacy audit?

A literacy audit is meant to:

- ✓ help you understand Canadian adults' literacy needs
- ✓ help you systematically identify possible barriers in the delivery of your services to the general public
- ✓ give you effective suggestions to continuously improve customer service
- ✓ help you communicate in plain or clear language¹ with clients
- ✓ reaffirm the practices you already do well as an organization

A literacy audit is not meant to:

- ✗ be used as a tool to label people as “illiterate” or “learning disabled”
- ✗ be used as a tool to test the literacy skills of your clients
- ✗ be a quick fix solution; it is the starting point for you to address ongoing literacy issues
- ✗ “dumb down” the language you use with clients
- ✗ evaluate the job performance of your staff

How will I benefit if I use the tools in this kit?

- Your client base will increase because you will be known for the quality and efficiency of your customer service
- Your productivity will increase because staff will be able to explain your procedures to clients in plain language
- You will save time in follow-up because clients will make fewer errors in filling out forms which have been edited for clarity
- Your staff's job satisfaction will improve as they connect with clients in more effective ways
- You will learn strategies to improve customer service to ALL clients, including those with low literacy or English as an Additional Language (EAL)²

¹Plain or clear language – a way of writing or speaking which uses common vocabulary so that your message is easy to understand the first time. For more information refer to Plain Language Guidelines.

² English as an Additional Language (EAL) is replacing the former term English as a Second Language (ESL).

Clear verbal communication

Using the following rating scale, please check the ONE response that most accurately describes your organization today:

A – We are doing this consistently.

B – We are doing this, but we could make some improvements.

C – We are not doing this, but we should be.

N/A – Not applicable.

Remember that you can fill out any or all sections of the literacy audit.

Clear verbal communication	A	B	C	N/A
Facilitating understanding				
1. We use plain language and the same key words when describing our services whether in speaking with clients, in our written materials, or on our website.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. We have identified the jargon and technical vocabulary it is important for clients to know and have developed an easy way to explain these words.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. We keep instructions brief and deliver them in step-by-step sequence.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. We are careful not to speak more loudly when it appears that a client does not understand what we have said.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. We are prepared to repeat information if it appears that a client does not understand what we have said.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. We are prepared to use alternate vocabulary if it appears that a client does not understand what we have said.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. We speak at a normal unhurried rate and clearly enunciate the words we use when we work with clients for whom English is an additional language.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Banking is like a different language. So, when I go to the bank they just assume that everybody knows banking language and I didn't know. I didn't know anything about credit issues and things like that.

- Paul



What is plain language?

Plain or clear language¹ is a way of communicating with people so that your message is easy to understand the first time. Plain language speaks directly to the reader or listener; the audience or clients are the focus, not your organization. **Plain language imagines how the audience understands the message** and focuses communication from that point of view.

Plain language uses:

- ✓ shorter sentences
- ✓ common vocabulary
- ✓ short paragraphs
- ✓ one idea per paragraph
- ✓ bulleted lists
- ✓ lots of white space on the page
- ✓ the first or second person, *I*, *you*, or *we* more often to engage the reader or listener
- ✓ visual organizers such as charts or pictures to illustrate main ideas
- ✓ a positive, friendly tone
- ✓ polite phrases to engage the reader or listener

Plain language does not use:

- ✗ long sentences with phrases and clauses strung together by commas
- ✗ jargon, technical language, acronyms, abbreviations, or Roman numerals
- ✗ long complicated paragraphs
- ✗ several ideas in one paragraph
- ✗ long lists in sentences separated by commas
- ✗ crowded words, diagrams, or paragraphs on the page
- ✗ the third person, *one*, *they*, or *them*, since it distances the reader or listener
- ✗ complicated graphs or diagrams to illustrate every point
- ✗ negative sentence constructions
- ✗ the shortest way of saying something if it means being blunt or accidentally rude

¹Plain language and clear language are interchangeable terms. Use either term when you research this concept.