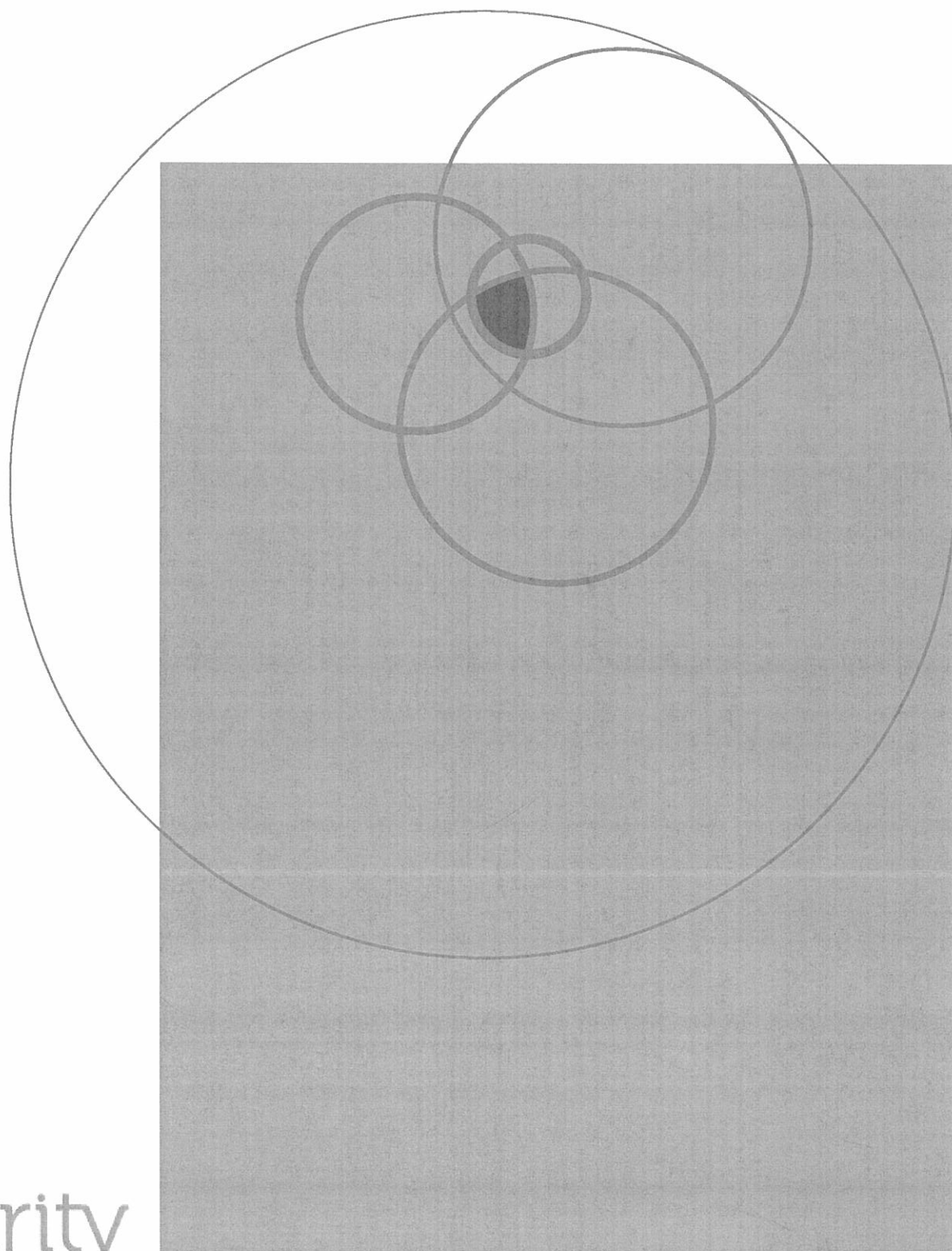


Number 72 2014(2) *Issue sponsor: More Carrot LLC*

# The Clarity Journal

Published by Clarity, the international association promoting plain legal language



clarity

# Plain Language for Accessibility, Democracy, and Citizenship



**Cathy Basterfield**, a Speech Pathologist with 26 years experience working with people with Complex Communication Needs. Cathy runs Access Easy English, a specialist business writing documents for people with non-functional literacy. In 2011 Cathy was awarded a Victorian government study scholarship to investigate accreditation and universal standards internationally, for people with limited literacy. Cathy is an acknowledged expert in the area of developing documents for people with limited literacy, the language, the techniques, the images and format to use. Her business provides training, consultancy and translation services to Easy English. Cathy has previously been involved in establishing Australian quality benchmarks, resource development and the development and adherence to in-house standards for Easy English.

By Cathy Basterfield and Mark Starford

## Summary

There is a growing international commitment to deliver information in more accessible ways for individuals with low literacy and comprehension. This article highlights the rights and challenges and features two case stories of how having access to Easy English (Read) increases community inclusion and self-determination.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) sets forth the economic, social and cultural rights to which all human beings are entitled. These fundamental rights of self-determination are essential to eliminating social and political exclusion. Particularly, groups are disadvantaged and marginalized due to ethnicity, caste, economic circumstance, sex, disability, or limited literacy. Human rights principles have been reaffirmed and refined in other international legislation over time. They all reiterate that the ideal of men and women enjoying freedom from fear and what can be achieved if conditions are created when everyone enjoys economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as civil and political rights.

The United Nations enacted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) with specific Articles that identify access to understandable information as paramount to freedom, opportunity and full participation. However, in practical terms, what does this mean?

For many communities there have been few changes in how they access and use information that is essential to decision making, health and wellbeing. Governments, human services and social practices can and do marginalise. This happens when governments, human services and social practices continue to neglect the needs of a large but voiceless group that cannot access traditional communication and information systems. Research shows there is a high correlation between lower literacy skills, inferior health outcomes, and reduced functional knowledge of financial obligations. In addition, lower income levels, underemployment, involvement with the justice system and social isolation are also highly correlated. For many, even in developed countries, fluency with and access to communication technology is limited. The reasons are twofold: both literacy and financial means are required to access the technology.

## Who is marginalised?

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), 2013 was completed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The research identified significant percentages of all populations have non-functional literacy. Across the world, 49% of adults have non-functional literacy. In Australia 44% in the adult population; in the U.S.A. 53%. See Figure 1. These numbers do not include people who are incarcerated, are remote populations, or are people living in group or institutional settings. Nor does it include Aboriginal populations. Often these populations are some of the most marginalised in our society. Because the OECD released its most recent data during the week of

the 2013 PLAIN conference, only 2006 data for other countries to US and Australia were discussed, at that time. Included here is the 2013 updated data for other countries. See Figure 2.

According to the PIAAC, 2013 research, the following defines someone with non-functional literacy:

- Requires a person to make matches between the text, either digital or printed, and information, and may require paraphrasing or low-level inferences.

**OR** at a lesser skill level

- Requires a person to read brief texts on familiar topics and locate a single piece of specific information. There is seldom any competing information in the text. Only basic vocabulary knowledge is required, and the reader is not required to understand the structure of sentences or paragraphs or make use of other text features.

**OR** at a lesser skill level

- Requires a person to read relatively short digital or print texts to locate a single piece of information that is identical to or synonymous with the information provided in the question or directive. Knowledge and skill in recognizing basic vocabulary, determining the meaning of sentences, and reading paragraphs of text is expected.

It is obvious that each level requires significant skill achievement. What does this mean for the members of our communities who do not reach any of these levels of achievement? How do these people find, access and use information important to their lives? Even information written in what many label as “Plain or Clear Language” can be too complex. Increased research and development of written and communication design formats must be undertaken. In Australia, one effort is called “Easy English.” In the U. S., it is called “Easy Read.”

## Who has non-functional literacy?

There are useful video clips from both Australia and the U.S. that begin to identify those who have non-functional literacy.

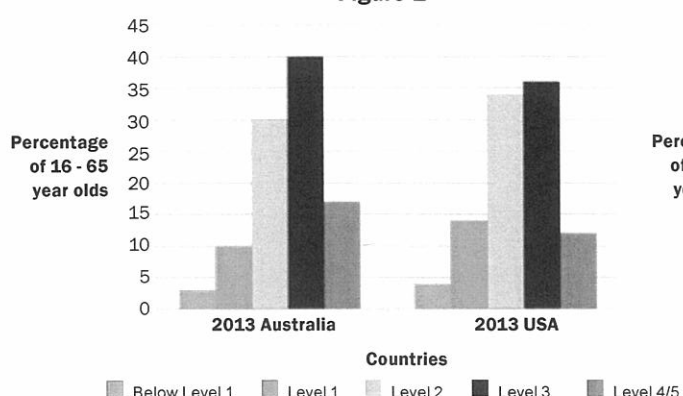
- Australia, Channel 7, Melbourne.  
<http://au.news.yahoo.com/today-tonight/latest/article/-/17489370/adult-illiteracy/>
- USA. American Illiteracy  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdQzCyp4i60>



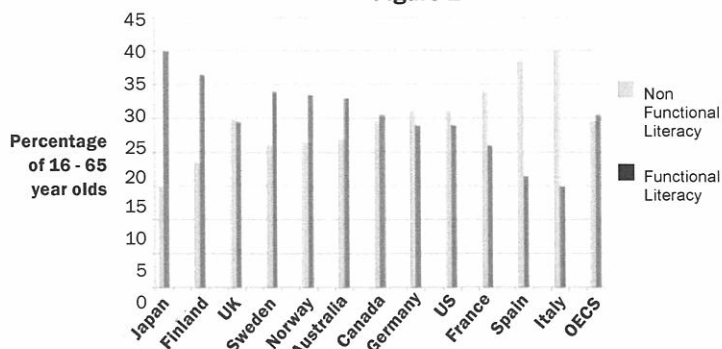
**Mark Starford**, is founder and executive director of the Board Resource Center (BRC), established in 1994. BRC provides leadership development and management facilitation for government agencies, non-profit organizations and community groups. BRC advocates for people from underserved communities for greater civic engagement and access to public policy making. With engagement from end-users and partners, BRC develops easy access training and tools that support people with limited literacy to increase self-determination and social inclusion. Active in training and advocacy for 30 years, Starford has designed community specific training curricula with supporting materials in a range of accessible formats used across the U.S. Mark holds a teaching credential and M.Ed. BRC offers a library of accessible training tools and media that make complex ideas easier to understand and apply.

## Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), OECD, 2013

2013 Literacy data for Australia and USA  
Figure 1



2013 Literacy data from many countries in the PIAAC research  
Figure 2



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Facilitation Manual and Worksheet

Published by: BRC and State Council of California

[http://www.brcenter.org/BRC\\_Board\\_Training/PDF/Facilitation.pdf](http://www.brcenter.org/BRC_Board_Training/PDF/Facilitation.pdf)

## Who are the people that need Easy English or Easy Read?

Typically, we think of people with a developmental or acquired disability. However, it does also include “the man in the street.” That is, the person who has had poor educational outcomes, or the elderly person with age related cognitive limitations, or diagnosed limitations such as dementia and Alzheimer’s. Consider also the person with recurring illnesses, or the person with mental health disorders. Additionally, there are other times when functional literacy is reduced; during a serious illness or times of great stress or when confronted with new and unfamiliar information. Additional populations may be impacted as well, including those from diverse cultural and language backgrounds including the Deaf community, first, second and even third generation immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Below are just 2 examples of the positive impact for individuals when information is written in a way in which they can read and understand. It also highlights their needs with regard to future development of Easy English (Australia) and Easy Read (US).

### Scenario 1

#### David’s story (US):

**Background:** David is a 32-year-old man with mild developmental disability. He lives in a large urban city with his family and is not employed. David is bilingual (English and Spanish) with very low literacy skills in both languages. He completed high school with a certificate of completion instead of a diploma.

**Situation:** David is an activist advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. David receives in-home support services from a large case management agency contracted with the state. The agency’s annual budget is more than \$150 million (US). David was nominated to be a member of their Board of Directors with a three-year term. He was approved. He is a peer representative for over ten thousand fellow self-advocates who receive services from the agency. David never received governance or leadership training but instead was provided with a two hundred page board member manual. He must come to each monthly meeting having reviewed a packet of information and prepared with questions and ready to vote on action items. David is lost and does not know what to do. He is unable to read the information and also does not understand the meeting protocol. He is ready to resign after the first meeting.

**Response:** David realized he had to advocate for himself and not quit. He called the Board Chair and explained the problem. The Chair was unaware and realized the agency needed to provide supports and board training if they want to maintain a diverse membership.

The Board’s actions included:

1. Reorganize the Board meeting structure to ensure David and other community members are comfortable and can participate. Provide facilitation support for David. Support included one-to-one coaching (before, during, after the meeting) to review the packet, organize questions, and adapt hard to understand language into Easy Read.
2. Create a summary board member manual, insert information graphics and only emphasize the key points.
3. Members receive training on the value of plain language and begin using post meeting evaluations.
4. The Board Development Committee conducts ongoing orientation and governance training for current and potential members.



**Outcome:** David is now in his third year as a full board member. With the adaptations and facilitation support he is now an active participant during meetings and comes to each meeting prepared to contribute to agenda items. Most important to David is that he went from feeling inferior and ready to quit to now not just being a contributing board member but encouraging other people with a disability that they have the right and responsibility to speak up when they need information in Easy English or graphics. Note: The agency has now added another person with a disability and provides support, and David is a peer mentor as well.

## Scenario 2

**Background:** Jenny is a 45-year-old woman, married with no children. Jenny works 5 days a week, traveling there and back by train. Jenny does not drive nor use the computers or emails at work. Jenny is expected to participate in all meetings, planning, goal setting and staff training at work. Jenny uses a passbook at the bank, rather than a debit or credit card. She understands how to use her cash for basic purchases. Jenny has a mild intellectual disability. Jenny describes herself as a non-reader.

**Situation:** As a self described non-reader, Jenny does not engage in reading or incidental reading (signage, wall notices) throughout her day. However, Jenny can read many everyday words, when they are written in short sentences and with a clear context. She will use images to aid her understanding of the written word. It takes her some time to read anything, and it is a tiring task for her. Jenny is highly motivated to read more things about her world and the options she has.

**Response:** Jenny has begun to support the development of a variety of Easy English documents. In 1:1 supported reading of Easy English documents, Jenny can read, understand and interpret meaning for herself and her family. As a consequence of this, she has developed improved confidence in her reading and understanding of the written language, and her self-esteem and confidence has expanded.

**Outcome:** Jenny has said she would prefer to see more information developed into Easy English about things of importance to her. This includes letters and forms from government departments; information on health issues that relate to herself and her husband; choices for weekly activities and holidays; information about her banking, bills and money; and also better information on bus and train timetables. Jenny wants to be able to use the email at work, rather than relying on her manager to get information all the time. Jenny needs to be able to access the information in staff training days, meetings and meeting agendas. Jenny says not having access to these things is frustrating.

## Summary

Providing information in a way the person understands best, that is, Easy Read (US) and Easy English (Australia) is a basic human right. Doing so increases participation in civic affairs and provides greater social inclusion. Large percentages of the population are all significantly marginalised. This population of readers demands our attention to ensure dignity, a higher quality of life with greater self-esteem increased independence, and the ability to contribute more meaningfully in health services, financial management, legal issues, employment and other community activities.

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