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***Hey, I can read that! Perspectives on plain language
and people with developmental disabilities***

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Hey, I can read that! Perspectives on plain language and people with developmental disabilities

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Jean:

I have a developmental disability. That just means it takes me a bit longer to learn things. I like to do lots of the same things as other people. I have all the same feelings too. Sometimes people think we have no feelings if we have a disability. They are wrong. I can get very mad when people call me names.

I am going to talk to you about my work as a translator. That is when I work with Janet and some others to make things easy to read.

People with developmental disabilities should be able to do as much for themselves as they can. That means they need things to be in plain words, so they can read and understand them. We need to be able to read about lots of things, like:

- ways to stay well
- to find jobs
- to understand what a medical consent form says before we agree to it
- to take our pills without mistakes
- to read when good TV shows are on, or which bus to take.

We need to be able to read labels and prices when we shop for food.

It's not fair when things we need to know are not written so we can read them. We feel left out. We have to wait for our support workers, or our family to tell us things. Sometimes they don't have time or they forget. We should be able to read them for ourselves.

Janet:

Just before we go further, I think a definition of developmental disability may be useful. The one we use in Alberta defines a developmental disability as one that involves substantial limitations in at least two basic living skills, such as self-care, managing a home, managing a budget, functional academics, or finding and keeping a job. As well, there must be a lower than normal IQ (below about 70). It applies to people who had pre- or peri-natal abnormalities or who have acquired disabilities (either from an illness or an accident) before reaching adulthood; and the condition must be long-standing. In Britain, the equivalent term for developmental disability is learning disability. In the US, the term often used is mental retardation. That label is hated by many of those who have to wear it.

Jean has given you good reasons for putting written information into plain language, so I won't add much here. There will always be some people in this population who do not read at all. For some who have severe disabilities, plain language materials can help their families or staff find ways to explain things in simple terms. For some others, basic reading skills are lacking merely because of inadequate schooling (especially among older people who spent their childhoods in institutions). For them, having materials which someone can read *to* them is helpful. For the rest, and these will be the majority of people with developmental disabilities, all they need is simple text.

Many won't ask for help. Why would they when they are quite aware of the stigma attached to being a non-reader. I'll tell you about one of the translators who works with me. She doesn't read at all. I asked her one day how she managed her grocery shopping. She told me she looked at the pictures on the cans, but she sometimes made a mistake and then, she said, "I have to eat it." But when I asked her if she ever requested help, she laughed and said "Yes. Sometimes I can't reach the things on the high shelves. Then I need someone to get them down for me." Being short is OK, but being illiterate is not.

The process of producing low-literacy materials is very similar to that for any plain language work, I think, but there are particular challenges in this field, apart from trying to reach a simpler level of language. For some people, comprehension is away beyond reading level. For those, plain language is a real advantage. Others can read the words easily, but may not understand them. I can't always guess what might be understood. Also, many have missed out on the life experiences that colour much of the perception of people without intellectual impairments. These events can include graduating from high school, getting a driver's licence, marrying or having children (or even growing up with family). This can affect the interpretation of information, both written and in picture format.

Another problem is that of explaining abstract concepts to people who tend to think in very concrete terms. So, for instance, *human rights* is difficult to explain. *Rights and wrongs*, and *rights and lefts* are more understandable. But while people with developmental disabilities are all too familiar with discrimination, it is often interpreted as the act of a mean individual, not as a systemic problem. We have some wonderful results at times, though, with learning happening in a variety of ways. One woman, who had spent a year in a group learning about rights, had a situation in which a Calgary Transit staff person wouldn't send down an elevator for her at a station where the public was expected to walk up a flight of stairs. His reason was that she didn't look disabled. (She has a brace on her leg, but it is hidden beneath her pants.) She ended up by writing to Calgary Transit. She received an apology and the policies were changed so that *anyone* asking for the elevator was entitled to have it sent down.

Health is another difficult expression. So is *values*. I've had *values* explained to me as meaning *jewellery* by one of the translators. So there are challenges which can be addressed by plain language, but it is not always a complete answer. There will always be difficulties in overcoming conceptual barriers.

Sometimes there are consistent reading problems I have to work around. For instance, neither *choose* nor *decide* seem to be easy words to read. I need to use that inelegant word *pick*. Or sometimes I can say *make up your own mind about...*

Another example is *chance*. I'll show you what I did in one place where the word occurred. I was working on information about dating. The article was about not leaving decisions around having sex to chance and that word was in the title. First of all, I tried *Don't take a chance*. The translators read it as *change*. So I changed it to *Don't take a risk*. But I wasn't happy with that, because *risk* is so negative. Also, *don't* was causing problems. I don't contract words any longer. What I ended up with, and it took me three weeks to think of it, was *Sex: Make no mistake*.

In producing plain language materials, I have been accused of patronising the readers. There is an inherent intellectual elitism in our society that has not yet been seriously addressed the way racism and sexism has. My accusers don't seem to notice they are carefully making out that their reading level is the only normal and acceptable one. Where does that come from if not from assuming fluent readers are superior and slower readers are not OK? I don't use baby words, but I do use the simplest term I can find and I do keep the information as brief and succinct as possible. We talk about disability pride at times when we do translation work together. Several of the translators now attend marches and demonstrations. Most are more prepared to complain about unfair treatment.

I have also on a number of occasions been told that I am "dumbing down" the language. I am always careful to point out I am not desecrating any classics, but I am seriously involved in communicating information and that this information has no value unless it is understood. I suggest that we are not "dumbing down" buildings when we include wheelchair ramps, even though many of us don't need them; nor are we inflicting alternative standards on everyone when we produce information in braille, or

Vietnamese. For me, plain language is a justice issue, as well as a practical one. People are entitled to whatever aids they need to help them function in society.

I also find the term “dumbing down” to be insulting, both to the population it refers to and also to the actual work involved in creating plain language. When I am giving a workshop, I always include an exercise in which participants have to make a simple sentence into bureaucratese. The results are hilarious, and people find out very quickly how much easier it is to write that way than to write in very plain prose.

And plain language certainly is practical, particularly given the present life-styles of people with developmental disabilities. We have de-institutionalised many people who have spent most of their lives in highly controlled environments. Most now have much more freedom to make choices, whether they live in group homes, or more independently. Often this is just what they want, but it can be a difficult transition for someone who has always been looked after to become instantly capable of decision-making. If you’ve never had to choose between having peas or carrots for dinner, choosing where to live or who to have sex with can be pretty hard. I find many of the materials we prepare involve helping readers to make choices.

Other materials aim to reduce opportunities for exploitation, a problem that is very real for people with developmental disabilities. As they become less sheltered, there are plenty of crooks who will take advantage of them. And as long as credit card applications, rental agreements and such like are too hard to understand, this will continue.

There are philosophical changes in the rehabilitation field too, with societal inclusion now being promoted. The idea is that family, friends and employers will leap in to provide support, so that paid staff become less necessary. Well, society hasn’t changed much yet in that direction, particularly as most people are increasingly busy earning a living, but underfunding for staff is already moving from chronic to crisis levels, at least in Alberta. All these factors mean that accessible information is important—and will continue to be important. There are no temporary quick fixes for people with life-long disabilities.

In my work, I try to bring language to a level simpler than that needed for the general public. I don’t take out every hard word, because I am writing for adults on adult topics. But when I use an unfamiliar word, I usually bold it and include a definition. So, for instance, *counsellor* is easier to read than *psychologist*; but having used that word, I would include an explanation that a *counsellor* is someone who is trained to listen to you and to help you with your problems.

I think that much of the work is similar to that done by general plain language writers. I use the active voice, avoid double negatives, use *I* and *you* pronouns, keep sentences short, cut out unnecessary words and keep paragraphs short, etc., etc. Then I take some of these steps further. For instance, my sentences are seldom more than 15 or 20 words, and I would not use more than two short clauses in a sentence.

I avoid euphemisms. The meaning is likely to be missed. A doctor asking if the patient is having sex is likely to get a truer answer than if she or he asked about intimate relationships. And euphemisms employed to cover up embarrassment about a stigmatised existence often cause great annoyance to those who are so labelled. *Challenged* and *special* are prime examples.

Here are some other points I have discovered in my work. We’ll zoom through them.

- *Everyone* and *anyone* seem to be easier to read than *everybody* and *anybody*. I have no idea why. It makes no sense to me but it has been a consistent finding in my work.
- Words are mis-read when hyphenated over a line. In fact, ideally sentences should end at the end of each line. Many of the translators pause there, as if there were a period. And many will read straight through a period when it comes in the middle of a line.
- I try to maintain consistency, even if it sounds boring. E.g., if *car* is understood, I don’t change it for *vehicle* in the next sentence. Some, who could read *car*, will not be able to read *vehicle*. And

some who can read both words will assume that I am using the words to mean two different things.

- If I am writing a list, I use complete sentences. I wouldn't say:

You can
go to the zoo,
stay at home and watch TV, or
go to the mall.

Instead, I would say:

Here are some things you can do.
You can go to the zoo.
You can stay at home and watch TV.
Or, you can go to the mall.

With a short list, it may make little difference, but with a longer list, the initial sentence fragment can be forgotten and the list becomes meaningless. Lots of repetition is good.

- I use words that are already in their specific vocabulary. The words *developmental* and *disability* each have 5 syllables and will bump up any computerised reading-level analysis, but they are nearly always readable for this population. *Residential* is often familiar. So is *guardian*. However, people with disabilities who could read these words often couldn't read *immigrant* or *sponsor*. In my testing with immigrants, the opposite was true. People become comfortable with words that occur within their own life experience.
- I use a 14 point modified sans serif font, where I can. A typical sans serif font like Arial is rather heavy and intimidating in large quantities. On the other hand, a serif font like Times Roman seems less clear to the translators. So I compromise with C.G. Omega or Zapf Humanist. They don't have tails, but they do have thick and thin strokes. I find them quite elegant, and the translators all like them. The size is good for reading - 12 point in these fonts is too small for them, and much bigger than 14 point spreads out the words too wide.
- I use graphics wherever I can, as long as they are relevant. I keep them plain, close to words they are illustrating, and I test them just as I would text.

After I have prepared the materials, I test them, as an essential part of the process. The translators who work with me are more than just focus group participants, they are genuine contributors to the process. Without them, the materials would not be as straight-forward. I continue to be surprised and excited at what they teach me.

Jean:

That is where I come in. Janet asks two or three of us to work with her. We read the papers out loud, a little bit at a time. Some of us cannot read at all. Those people listen. Some, like me, can read well. We talk about what each bit means, and we say when we do not understand. Sometimes Janet has to help us find better words and sometimes we find them ourselves. We all take part. No one is ever put down. We all have to feel safe together or it would be too hard to say when we did not understand something. But we know when we say we do not understand, we help lots of others who do not understand.

After we have worked on the papers, Janet goes over them again and puts in the words we have picked. Sometimes we work on the same paper two or three times before we are all happy with it. It can take a long time.

Many of us have learned to read better while we do this work. Sometimes Janet makes a joke that we have become too good and she will have to fire us! But she doesn't. She finds new translators and we stay on to help them. And I have learned a lot from the things I have worked on.

One of the best parts of the job is getting paid. Other people get paid when they go to work. Often people with developmental disabilities don't. Getting paid is fair. Janet couldn't do this work without us.

It feels good that there is something I can do that is really useful. I like to help others. When people can read more, they can do more for themselves and not be left out.

Here is a list of a few of our papers:

A booklet on how to stay safe in your homes and on the streets;
pamphlets on epilepsy, and on diabetes, on dating, and on sexual assault.
We have pamphlets on what to do if the police arrest you.
We have even dull things like rules for committees.

When I know more, I feel good about myself. People can't push me about.

It is good to work together. We get to be friends with each other. Sometimes we share stories, if we are working on something that makes us mad or upset. Many of us have been hurt and when we work on important things like dating or sexual assault, it reminds us of these times. It is good to talk to each other then.

Janet:

Our work is having a growing effect in Alberta. We do translations for our primary funders, Persons with Developmental Disabilities Boards (PDD), and for other agencies providing services for people with developmental disabilities. There is an awareness developing, slowly about its usefulness, and indeed the necessity for it. Where possible, we teach workshops, so that others can begin a similar process for themselves. Staff at PDD have to learn still about what is worth having translated, and sometimes request lengthy reports which few people would read anyway. But at least they know it's a "good idea."

Our most enthusiastic supporters can be found among non-profit generic organisations which work with marginalised people of all sorts—school drop-outs, people with English as a second language (and that includes many deaf people), those with learning disabilities, living on the streets, or in trouble with the law. There is also a need for plain language for almost anyone who is in crisis (for example, in hospital, or trying to escape an abusive relationship). Poverty and fear are the most effective agents I know of for reducing reading ability and comprehension. The only problem is that the organisations which appreciate it most are often the very ones which can least afford to cover the costs. As you can imagine, doing it properly is not a quick process.

I thought I would end with some pictures, as this is something different from much business-style plain language production.

- Choose plain, "Dick and Jane" pictures, with enough detail to be clear, but not any extra to divert attention. If someone in the picture has no shoes on, or no facial features, that is likely to distract.
- Don't use metaphors - a finger with a ribbon tied around it is likely to be interpreted as a finger with a ribbon tied around it.
- Don't use symbols - they are another kind of language which may not have been taught. If you have spent years in an institution, why would you know what a red circle with a diagonal line through it means?
- Look for pictures which represent the population you are writing for. There aren't many for people with disabilities, but try at least to avoid totally non-representative ones, such as business women with high heels and brief cases.

Jean: Thank you for listening.



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Janet Pringle

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Janet is the Plain Language Coordinator at the Vocational and Rehabilitation Research Institute, an agency in Calgary that serves people with developmental disabilities. She is working on a project to help people with disabilities tell their life stories. In her distant past, she was a Scot, a nurse, and home-making mother.



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Jean Ross

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Jean has been a plain language translator for several years. She works with Janet Pringle to make documents easier to read, and she enjoys art and drama. She enjoyed seeing Toronto during her visit.