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<tr>
<td><strong>Authors(s)</strong></td>
<td>Trimble, Julie</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Publication date</strong></td>
<td>2009-07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>Library Association of Ireland. Health Sciences Libraries Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link to online version</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.hsg.ie/files/HINT%20July%202009.pdf">http://www.hsg.ie/files/HINT%20July%202009.pdf</a></td>
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<td><strong>Item record/more information</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2785">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2785</a></td>
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How to make your library more accessible to all users

Libraries are currently under pressure to provide quality services with limited financial resources. One improvement which is easy and affordable is to make the documents we produce accessible to all of our users. In most cases we do not know our audience or if they have any particular requirements such as large text, colour preferences, or electronic format. Some of our readers may have difficulty reading and understanding English.

For this reason, we should be ensuring that documents are designed to suit as many people as possible. That way everyone can get the information they need easily and quickly, without having to request and then wait for an alternative to be produced. I fear that users rarely make such requests and as a result never receive the information they are seeking. Making information accessible is a legal requirement and if we ignore it we risk excluding users or preventing them from participating fully. Thankfully making documents accessible does not have to be difficult.

Anyone should be able to pick up any document produced by your library, with no prior knowledge, and understand it on the first reading. If a user does not understand what they are reading they will give up and you will not have got your message across. Users often say they are unaware of the services provided by the library so we must ensure they are not isolated by our documentation.

User guides, leaflets, websites and anything else which is aimed at a group of users should be simple, written in plain English, and should avoid jargon or words not used in everyday speech. With an increased emphasis on widening participation we will continue to encounter users with diverse backgrounds and experience. For tips and advice on using plain English refer to the Plain English Campaign’s website at http://www.plainenglish.co.uk

Those who design libraries and other public buildings take accessibility very seriously. Designers must ensure that new buildings are accessible for everyone by providing lifts, sliding doors and good signage. The same care and consideration should be taken when designing your documents.

The easiest way to make your information accessible is to make it available on your website. Pictures and bright colours can make documents more appealing but can also make them more difficult to read for some people. It is a good idea to provide a plain text version of all documents such as a Microsoft Word document. Plain text documents can be read using almost any software and give the user the option of enlarging the font, changing the font and background colours or using assistive technology, such as a screen reader, to read the text.

Remember that when you provide information you must provide an alternative for anything which may be inaccessible for some people. Therefore if you use pictures and diagrams to demonstrate a point, you must also provide a text alternative.

Here are some tips for making documents more accessible:

- Use sans-serif fonts – these are the ones without strokes at the tops and bottoms of letters e.g. Arial, Verdana and Comic Sans
- Use minimum font size 12
- Use bold to emphasis text rather than italics or underline which can make text more difficult to read
- Use the styles in Microsoft Word as they allow people using screen readers to navigate documents easily and skip to the relevant part
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short – bullet points are easier to read than continuous prose
- Use double rather than single line spacing and leave a space between paragraphs
- If you use columns of text make sure there is a large gap between them otherwise a screen reader may read across the text from left to right rather than up and down
- There should be a good contrast between the colour of your text and the background e.g. black on white or cream (but not white on black which is difficult to read)
- Avoid patterned backgrounds

Finally do not waste time producing documents in a variety of formats in an attempt to suit potential users. It is much easier to make one accessible document which everyone can use, including people with disabilities and other non-traditional readers.

Julie Trimble is the Access Librarian at University College Dublin.