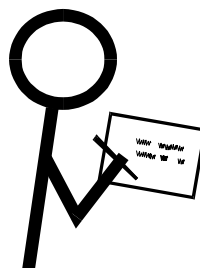
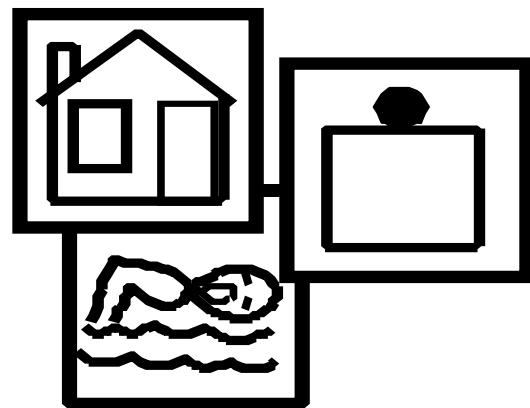
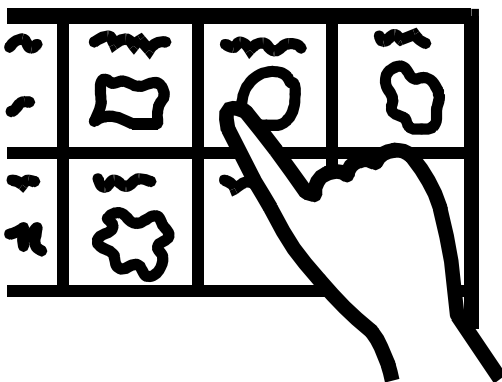


Using symbols



Guidance

People with learning disabilities can use symbols to communicate, to be more independent and to help them understand text. There are a number of things that you should think about when preparing easy information that uses symbols.



Easy summary

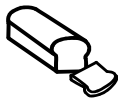
The key points covered in this section are:



cup



to



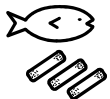
bread



milk



jam



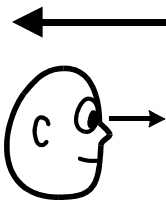
fish fingers



shampoo

1. What are symbols? Symbols are simple line drawings that stand for words and ideas. You can look at some symbols and know straight away what they stand for. Others need to be learnt.

2. Why symbols are helpful. People with learning disabilities use symbols in different ways. People with learning disabilities can use them to communicate with other people or to be more independent. Symbols can also help people with learning disabilities understand written information.



I

saw

a fish.

3. Which symbols should be used?

Different people use different symbol systems.

Choosing which system can be difficult. You should ask the people the information is for, which symbols to use.

4. How symbols can be used.

Symbols are used to help understand the important words in a written or spoken message. Symbols should be big enough for people to see them easily. They should be used in simple sentences. There are different ways of laying out information which uses symbols. People who will use the information should decide which is the best layout for them.

1 What are symbols?

A symbol is a simple line drawing that stands for words or ideas.

Example:  cup

This cup may not be like the one that you use at home but represents the idea of 'cup'.

Symbols generally fall into three categories:^{1, 2}


Symbols that are easy to recognise;

Example:  car

Symbols that could be quite easily learned;

Example:  me

Symbols that are very abstract and could be difficult to learn.

Example:  to

Although many symbols are well known from everyday use symbols have no fixed meanings. The same symbols can mean different things to different people. Always check with the people that your information is for what they understand from the symbols.

2 Why symbols are helpful

People with learning disabilities use symbols for a number of different purposes:

Some people use them as their main way of communicating.

Example: a person may have a book made up of pages of symbols that they point to.

What position I would like to be in:



in my wheelchair



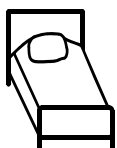
sat at the table



lying on the floor



in a beanbag



lying on my bed

They can help people to make choices.^{2, 3}

Example: a person might express their choice of drink in the pub:



cola

or



lager

They can help people understand.¹

Example: a person might have a better understanding of where they are going that day if they were regularly shown a symbol that stands for the activity:



horseriding

They can help people remember things.²

Example: a person could have a calendar that reminds them of significant events.

1 February	2	 dentist	4	5	6	7
8  hospital app	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18  haircut	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28  Mums b'day

They can help people be more independent.¹

Example: a person could have a shopping list of symbols so that they can go around the supermarket on their own.



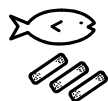
bread



milk



jam



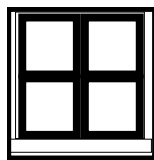
fish fingers



shampoo

They can support people whose first language is not English.⁴

Example: a person could be shown a symbol with the word in both their first language and English.

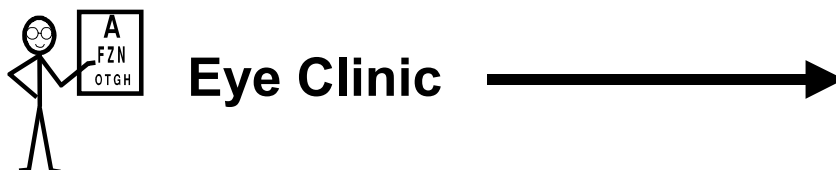


okno

window

They can assist people with written information.^{1, 2, 5}

Example: signage in a building



Symbols provide an extra chance for you to get your message across.^{1, 3}

Symbols can also remind supporters that they need to explain information. People who support individuals with learning disabilities will still need to help the individual to understand new information.

3 Which symbols should be used?

You should choose symbols that meet an individual's need and preference.

There is no nationally agreed symbol system.⁶ This is difficult when you want to use symbols to support information that is being given to a wide audience.² But it does allow flexibility for those involved in finding appropriate symbols to meet an individual's needs.

Try to use one of the more commonly used systems.⁶ If your information is for local use try to find out what symbol system people with learning disabilities commonly use in your area. Some systems have been produced for local use.^{2, 1}

Whatever symbol system you choose you should try to consider the following points:

Try to use symbols from one symbol system in a piece of information.²

Try to use symbols in the same way in different settings. Adopt a clear policy on using symbols that is in keeping with what is happening in your local area.²

Try to use symbols that are pictorial and show what they mean rather than abstract symbols.²

Use photographs where possible, especially when referring to a particular person or place. Digital cameras can be very useful for this.^{1, 7} Photographs should be clear, close-up shots of the subject with minimal background clutter. See the guidance section on 'Using pictures' for more information about this topic.

If you have a choice of symbols for one concept you should ask people with learning disabilities which they think is best.¹

If your symbol system does not include a word or idea that you want to use you should:

- Check your system's wordlist and see if there is another symbol that would be suitable.
- Think about whether you could use another idea that may be easier for people to understand.
- Ask people with a learning disability to help you create a new symbol.^{1, 2}

4 How symbols can be used

Getting started

You should get training on using symbols.^{1, 2}

You can find information to help you on symbols websites.¹

You should set up a user group to advise you on making your information easy to understand.

Many symbol systems now come in software packages. Individual symbols can also be imported as 'pictures' into common computer programmes such as Microsoft Word, Publisher and PowerPoint.¹ It is important to check that the symbol system is compatible with your PC. You will need to know the file name of the symbol you wish to include.

Try to ensure that the symbol package you use is easily available so that you can provide information at short notice.

Sentence structure

Use simple plain English and follow the general good practice for easy information. (See the guidance section on 'Words and language' for more information about this topic.) Using symbols can help you do this.¹

Avoid making sentence longer than one line.¹ Do not split sentences over 2 pages. Do not use abbreviations.

Each sentence or new idea should be placed on a separate line with a line break between.^{1, 3}

It can be confusing to explain every word using a symbol. Use symbols to explain the information giving or 'keywords' in the sentence that could not be predicted. The keywords are the words that give us the message.

Example:



The man drove the car in the garage

1

2

3

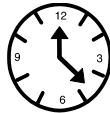
Try to avoid sentences that contain more than three 'keywords'.¹ Words such as 'in', 'on' and 'under' can be keywords when their use is not easily predicted. In this example the man is unlikely to have put the car 'on' or 'under' the garage.

This is also true of verbs. In this example the verb 'to drive' can be predicted, as that is what people usually do with cars. If the man had 'pushed' the car into the garage then 'pushed' would have been a keyword as the reader would be unlikely to predict this.

Try to put the main message of the sentence first.¹

Symbols can have a different meaning depending on the context so ensure that each symbol is relevant to the concept.^{1, 2, 3}

Example:



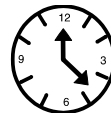
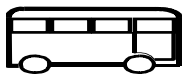
Our comfortable

prompt

bus service.....

Individuals trying to decipher this message would have difficulty understanding the adjectives 'comfortable' and 'prompt' without knowing what they refer to.

The sentence is better written as:



Our bus service is comfortable and prompt.....

Symbols can have a different meaning depending on the context so ensure that each symbol is relevant to the concept.^{1, 2, 3}



I



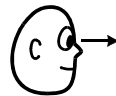
saw



fish



I



saw



fish

All of the symbols sets have similar conventions for past tenses. Refer to the symbol provider's guidance on grammatical structure of their symbols. The use of plurals and tense may vary.

One method of distinguishing tense is by placing an arrow above the symbol.⁴



Future

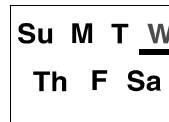


Past

Avoid using pronouns. Replace them with the noun.⁴

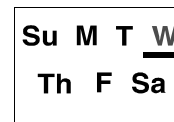
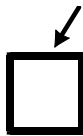
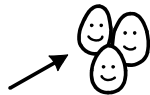
Example:

You should write:



Your rubbish will be picked up by the refuse collectors on Wednesday.

You should not write:



They will collect

it

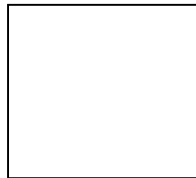
on Wednesday

It can be useful to look at the symbols without the text to ensure you have included all the keywords in your message.^{1, 3}

Design and Layout

Size

A lot of people with learning disabilities have some difficulties with their vision. Text and symbols should be quite large. Symbols should be no smaller than the area of this square.



Text should be at least size 14 font.¹

Colour

Most symbol systems are made up of simple black line drawings.


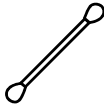

There are two ways of using colour. There is a colour symbol set. Some packages allow you to colour the lines of black and white symbols.

A lot of colour can mean more information to take in. This can be confusing. Black and white lines are easiest for most people with visual impairments.¹


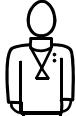
Position

People position their symbols on a page in different ways. No one way has been proved as more effective.

1. Some people prefer to have the symbols positioned above the words they represent in a sentence. This happens when writing using a symbols package. This method can be particularly helpful for people with some reading skills.

Example:   
It's bad to put cotton buds in your ears

2. Some people prefer one or two symbols separate to the text.

Example:   If you have earache you should visit your doctor

It is very important that you ask people with learning disabilities how the symbols should be positioned.¹

Before distributing material that uses symbols

Make sure that any copyright rules laid down by the symbol provider have been followed. Most providers ask that you put an acknowledgement statement somewhere on the document.²

Make sure that some people with learning disabilities have been asked to check out the finished document.¹

Resource section

There are three main sources of symbols in the UK: Widgit Rebus, Mayer-Johnson Picture Communication system and Makaton. Makaton's symbol system is designed to be used in an integrated way with signing and speech. There are also additional symbols by other groups such as Signalong.

You could contact the speech and language therapists at your local Community Learning Difficulties Team for advice on the use of symbols.

Widgit

Address:

124 Cambridge Science Park
Milton Rd
Cambridge
CB4 0ZS

Telephone: (01223) 425 558 Fax: (01223) 425 349

Email: info@widgit.com

Website: www.widgit.com

Makaton Vocabulary Development Project

Address:

31 Firwood Drive
Camberley
GU15 3QD

Telephone: 01276 61390

Email: mvd@makaton.org

Website: www.makaton.org

Mayer-Johnson Inc.

Address:

P.O. Box 1579
Solana Beach CA 92075
U.S.A.

Telephone: 011 +1 858 550-0084

Fax: 011 +1 858 550-0449

Email: mayerj@mayer-johnson.com

Website: www.mayer-johnson.com

Signalong is a sign-supporting system based on British Sign Language.

Address:

The Signalong Group
Stratford House
Waterside Court
Neptune Close
Rochester
Kent
ME4 4NZ

Website: www.signalong.org.uk

SymbolWorld is a non-commercial website, providing safe, fun and easy to use on-line resources for symbol users.

Website: www.symbolworld.org

An overview of relevant issues can be found in: Beukelman D R, Mirenda P. Augmentative and Alternative Communication: management of severe communication disorders in children and adults. Paul Brookes Publishing Co.; 1998.

You can find more resources to help you make **easy information** on www.easyinfo.org.uk

Rebus, Makaton and PCS symbols were used in this guidance. The guidance does not necessarily represent the views of these organisations.

References

1. Evidence from Information for All interviews, 2003.
2. Abbott C. Symbols now. Leamington Spa: Widgit Software Ltd; 2000.
3. Ward E. Picture This: Report on using pictures and symbols with people who have a learning difficulty. Brixton: Brixton Social Education Centre; undated.
Detheridge T, Detheridge M. Literacy through symbols (second edition), London: David Fulton; 2002.
4. Sheehy K. The Effective Use of Symbols in Teaching Word Recognition to Children with Severe Learning Difficulties: a comparison of word alone, integrated picture cueing and the handle technique. International Journal of Disability, Development and Education 2002: **49**(1): 47–59
5. Moffatt V. Life without jargon. London: Choice Press; 1996.
6. Greenhalgh L. Well Aware – improving access to health information for people with learning difficulties. Anglia and Oxford: NHS Executive; 1994.

This guidance was produced in February 2004. It was written by the Information for All team at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol (Telephone: 0117 923 8137) and RNIB Multiple Disability Services. The work was funded by the Department of Health. Drawings are by Maxine Letham and design is by Karen Gyde and Sue Pirrie. There are a total of 13 sections of guidance. These are listed in the 'Introduction to the guidance'. All the guidance can be found on www.easyinfo.org.uk

