

Writing clearly for clients and colleagues - The human service practitioner's guide, Lyceum Books, 2015

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Ames, Natalie and Fitzgerald, Katy, Writing Clearly for Clients and Colleagues - The Human Service Practitioner's Guide, Chicago, Lyceum Books, INC, 2015, pp 171 including index, ISBN 978-935871-65-1

The aim of this book is to enable practitioners to create readable materials for service users with limited literacy skills and to be able to go on to transfer the writing skills required to other forms of communication including electronic communication.

The authors have a self-confessed 'fascination with grammatical correctness' and the book is designed to help practitioners write clearly and simply.

The book begins by distinguishing academic writing from professional writing and introduces the concept of readability which remains a constant theme throughout the text. The authors argue that it is the responsibility of the practitioner to make communications clear and simple, not the responsibility of the service user to understand. Identifying the connection between poverty, educational attainment and reading ability, the authors appropriately identify that service users may benefit most from readable materials. It is not only the poor who may have difficulty reading an agency's materials however and a much wider audience can benefit from the identification of what a specific audience needs to know and providing that information clearly, simply and concisely. Obtaining the skills to complete this task is what the book aims to provide.

Each chapter follows a format of providing an overview of relevant theory and research, and then grounding that theory through examples of what it might mean in practice, followed by a focussed reference list. For example the initial chapter on why readability matters explores ideas around literacy, reading and comprehension and then provides some guidelines and examples for creating readable materials based

on the underlying knowledge. Other chapters cover making your writing clear, planning, measuring effectiveness, using feedback, writing for wider audiences such as staff, media or grant bodies, electronic communication and documentation with a concluding appendix reviewing grammar and punctuation.

As could be expected the two authors, one currently an academic, the other a practitioner, write clearly and convey complex ideas in an accessible and usable way. Although written for a US audience the content is readily applicable to the UK context. The writing skills of social workers in particular in the UK in respect of formal reporting such as court reports have been subject to some criticism. The focus of this book is not primarily a guide to report writing or case recording and a reader looking for guidance in these areas could initially be disappointed. Rather the primary focus of the book is on the materials an agency provides to actual or potential service users about the services they provide, whether that is in pamphlet form or web based. In this respect the book achieves its aim admirably. There is a real depth of information and guidance provided within a short space, not just about the actual writing of text but about, for example, making a website readable and accessible through applying a knowledge of reading levels to the design of meta tags and search capability.

A close reading of the text demonstrates a wider applicability. The final chapter applies the principles and techniques of readability in writing for clients to writing about clients, in respect of assessments and case recording, with useful insights about writing in the active and passive voice. Application of the principles put forward in the book will benefit any professional writing. The appendix on grammar and punctuation is very useful and could perhaps have been more prominent. It does however require a relatively high level of previous knowledge about grammar on the

part of the reader to get the best out of the information provided. It might have been useful to have provided some initial basic information on for example nouns, verbs and clauses before moving to the relatively advanced advice which follows.

Poor professional writing is much commented on and little acted upon. This book will be of use to practitioners, managers, educators and students in improving skills and outputs for the ultimate benefit of service users.

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