

Information for people with learning disabilities who have visual impairments



Guidance

Lots of people with learning disabilities have visual impairments. People with visual impairments are blind or have difficulty seeing things. Most ways to help people with learning disabilities who have visual impairments don't cost much money. Planning things in advance helps to keep the cost down.



Easy summary

The key points covered in this section are:



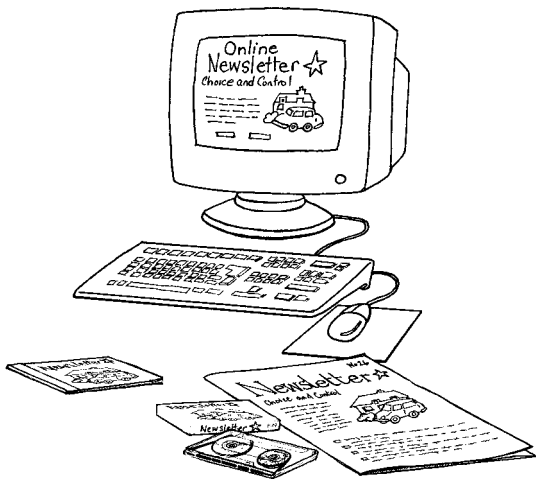
1. People with visual impairments see things in different ways. Only a few people with visual impairments can see nothing at all. Lots of people need help to see better.



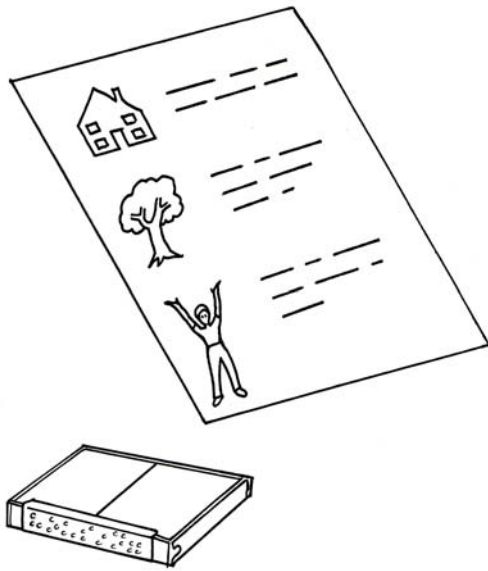
2. Different people with visual impairments have different needs. They will want information in different formats. Many people with visual impairments can read large print if it is written clearly and boldly. Lots of people with visual impairments want information on tape or CD. Some people need more than one format.



3. Plan in advance and ask people what they need. Think right from the start about how you make your information easier for people with visual impairments. This is easier and cheaper than doing it later.



4. Think about the formats you use. The way you present your information can help visually impaired people see and understand things better. This includes the design and layout of written information. It includes the way you use pictures and photographs. It also includes making your websites and CD Roms easy to use.



5. Lots of visually impaired people want their information on audio. You can make it easier for people to listen to tapes, CDs and videos and remember what they hear. You should label audio information so visually impaired people know what it contains.



6. Supporters can help people with visual impairments to access information. There are lots of easy ways to help people. Most of these cost nothing at all.

1 People with visual impairments see things in different ways

People with learning disabilities often have visual impairments.² They can't see well, even when they are wearing the right glasses or contact lenses.³ Lots of them need help to see better. Out of every 10 people with learning disabilities, 3 people will have a visual impairment.⁴

Out of every 10 people with learning disabilities, 4 have hearing impairments.⁴ Some people have both sight and hearing problems.¹

Only a few people with visual impairments can see nothing at all. Most people can see something.⁵ Some visually impaired people see the world as a blur - a bit like a fuzzy picture in pale colours. They might have to guess what they are seeing. Other people have 'tunnel vision', like looking through two toilet rolls. Older people sometimes can't see things in front of them but they can see things to the side. There are people who only see things on one side or the other.⁶ Many people with visual impairments can't see colours well.⁷

Lots of people don't know they have visual impairments. They haven't had an eye test recently.² Some people need to wear glasses, or have operations to help them see better.⁸

People often need help to get used to glasses.⁹ They need support to have operations.¹⁰

Low vision clinics can recommend magnifying glasses or special equipment to help people see. These clinics are usually at eye hospitals. They show visually impaired people the best ways to read print. They may teach them what sort of lighting helps them best.¹¹ Clinics can teach people where to sit so lighting helps them.

Lots of people with visual impairments find reading tiring. They can only read a little at a time, even with a low vision aid or special equipment.¹¹

2 Different people with visual impairments have different needs

Lots of people with visual impairments can read big print.¹² People who can't see clearly often get their friends or family to read to them and tell them about the pictures.¹² But some people with visual impairments can see some pictures.¹¹

People read things in different ways. Many people want to read by themselves, especially private things. Lots of people with visual impairments like tapes or CDs.¹² Some people listen to tapes and look at the pictures at the same time.¹¹

Lots of people with learning disabilities and visual impairments were not taught to read at school. Some adults have learned to read print when they got glasses or special equipment to help them.¹

Some visually impaired people learned to read using braille or Moon.¹ People read braille and Moon by feeling bumps on special paper. Only a few people with learning disabilities read this way.¹ You need help to produce braille and Moon because they are written with machines. Braille and Moon can be produced from documents in Microsoft Word.¹

Braille is made up of dots.¹³ You need a good sense of touch to learn to use braille.¹⁴ Moon looks like ordinary letters so it is easier for people who can read to learn.¹⁴ Braille and Moon take up more space than print. Documents can be very heavy to post or to carry.¹³

You can post documents free for visually impaired people on tape or disk, in braille and Moon. Ask RNIB (Royal National Institute of the Blind) how to send documents labelled 'Articles for the blind'. See the resource section at the end of this guidance for more information.

People with visual impairments need the formats that help them most.¹ They do not always want the same formats all the time. They may want one format for reading things, and another format to keep for reference.¹⁶ For example, it is hard to find the right place on a tape when a meeting is going on.

People often want to have short documents (like an agenda) in print or braille.¹⁶ People often like longer documents (like minutes of meetings) on tape or CD.¹ They may want a summary of a long document (like minutes) instead.¹ Sometimes people will need a summary and a long document. Lots of visually impaired people use braille or Moon just for labelling things.¹

Try to avoid using handwriting. Lots of people with visual impairments find it hard to read. If you have to write by hand, use a black felt tipped pen on white or pale paper and write in large letters.¹⁹

3 Plan in advance and ask people what they need

It is more difficult to make material accessible if you don't think about it until later. It might cost more money too.¹

Before you start, try to find out as much as possible about your audience. Let your audience know they have a choice of formats.

Ask them what they need.¹ You don't want to pay for information to be put into braille if nobody can read it. Check that people want braille in English. Welsh braille is produced in Wales.¹ Braille is written at 2 different levels. If people don't know what level they read, get braille in Grade 1.¹³

Lots of visually impaired people will want audio. Some people will want pictures described to them, but other people won't.^{1, 12}

Find out if you can make things accessible by yourself. You may need to get help. It may take time to get people to help you.¹ You may have to pay other people to help, like putting something into braille or copying lots of tapes for you.

You may need money for this. But it shouldn't cost much.¹
You should budget for some visually impaired people to have more than one format.¹ You may need help to put documents into braille or Moon. Both formats can be produced from Microsoft Word.¹

4 Think about the formats you use

The way you present your information can help visually impaired people see and hear things better. This helps them to understand more.¹

Design and layout

Easy information for people with visual impairments should be printed clearly and boldly. The words and pictures should be laid out in a way that is easy to see, read and follow. See the guidance section on 'Design and layout' for more information about this topic.

You should use 14 point print or larger to help visually impaired people. You can ask people what print size they like. Ariel is the best font for every day. But visually impaired people are all different. One font and one print size will not suit everyone.⁷

The print on the page should show up well. This is called contrast. The contrast between the text and the background is important. Lots of people with visual impairments find it easiest to see dark print on white paper.

Avoid shiny paper. It is hard to read. Use paper that weighs over 90 gsm. Photocopying paper usually weighs a bit less than this.

Pictures

The position of pictures on the page is important. You should not fit words around pictures.⁵ Pictures should show important things clearly. Big pictures are easier to see than little ones. Simple clear outlines usually work best. It can be hard for people to see small cluttered drawings.¹ Try to avoid putting text over pictures or photographs. People with visual impairments can find this confusing.⁵

Using contrasting colours helps people with visual impairments to see things clearly against the background. It is hard for people to see things that blend into the background.⁶

Some people with visual impairments cannot tell things at the front of a picture from things at the back. Try to remember this when deciding which pictures to use.¹

Some people with visual impairments find photographs easier to see than pictures.¹ Symbols, funny pictures or diagrams can be confusing and hard to understand.¹ See the guidance section on 'Using pictures' for more information about this topic.

Computer based information

There are different ways of reading information on a computer using Microsoft Word. You can change the font, print size and colour of the background of the screen. This can help some visually impaired people to read from the screen. You can do this on all computers.¹⁵

Some visually impaired people are helped by software that makes the letters big on the screen.¹⁵ There may only be a few letters on the screen at a time. It is best to get training to learn this way of reading and writing.¹

If you produce your text on a computer, you can give it to visually impaired people on a disk or CD ROM. Or you could email it to them. People with learning disabilities and visual impairments often like to read from a screen. Not everyone wants to print things for themselves.¹

Reading from a screen means that people can decide to use the font, background or print size that helps them see best. They may need advice from RNIB if they want to produce braille or Moon from documents on computers. Some people will have access to a braille embosser (machine) so they can produce their own braille from email, disk or CD ROM.¹

You can buy screen-readers for computers. Screen-readers read out the words on the screen. There are different screen-readers.¹⁵ Screen-readers can be expensive. You should get advice on the most suitable one before buying anything.¹ You usually need training to get the best from a screen-reader.¹ JAWS is the most popular one with people with visual impairments now. JAWS can read text from Microsoft Windows format and accessible documents on the Internet.¹

Websites

It is important to design your website so visually impaired people can access it. People need to be able to adjust their text and colour settings on the browser to suit their needs.

Other people will browse websites using large print software or screen-reader software. The 'Resource section' at the end of this guidance tells you where to get advice about designing websites for visually impaired people.

See the guidance section on 'Computer based information' for more information about this topic.

5 **Lots of visually impaired people want their information on audio**

People find it hard to listen to tapes if they can't see words and pictures. They may get tired or bored. You can make it easier for them to listen to tapes, CDs and videos and remember what they hear.¹

It is a good idea to think very carefully about how you record the audio version.¹⁶ Tapes should start with a short overview of what the information is about.¹ Sighted people often find this out by looking at the picture on the front of the information or the tape.¹

Speed is important. People may not understand things if the reader goes too fast. You may need to read complicated things extra slowly.¹

People with visual impairments often want someone to tell them about the pictures. But some people won't be interested.¹ It is important that people with visual impairments are told key messages from the pictures if they want this.

If you know your audience, you can ask them if they want to be told about pictures. If you don't know them, you need to decide what you are going to do.¹

If you can get the time and money you might decide to make 2 audio versions. You could do 1 version with someone describing the pictures. And you could have a second audio version with a person just reading the words.¹

You might decide to tell people some things about the pictures. They might like to know if the person in the picture is a man or a woman, is black or white. They might identify with the pictures if they know the person in the picture uses a wheelchair, is young or is old.¹

Sometimes pictures are used to explain things instead of words. You need to take great care to make sure your audio version tells people with visual impairments the important things that are not written in the text.¹

If you decide to describe pictures, you should write down in advance the words to be read out.¹⁶

Try to tell people what is happening in the front of the picture. Having an understanding about what is going on in the background of the picture can help too. Things at the front of the picture are usually more important than things in the background.¹

But sometimes the background explains where something is happening. For example, you would want to know if the picture showed someone talking to a doctor. It might be important to know if they were at the doctor's surgery or in the person's home.¹

The person reading on to the tape should describe the most important things in a picture. Sometimes the author of the material and the reader of the tape see the picture in different ways. So get the author to write down the key points in each picture. And then ask the author to listen to the tape.¹

You need to describe pictures briefly and clearly. Read the text on the page and **then** describe the pictures on that page.¹

It works best if you use the same words on the tape as in the text wherever possible. This helps people remember things. Keep it short! Lots of people get bored with too much detail.¹

See the guidance section on 'Audio' for more information about this topic.

Video

You need to think about making your videos accessible to visually impaired people. You could have a narrator to explain what is happening in the video. You might not need a narrator if the video is about 2 or 3 people talking if they all sound different. But you need to introduce who is talking.¹⁷

Making videos in short sections helps people concentrate. It allows people to discuss each section separately if they want to.¹

If you are separating sections with captions, read them out for visually impaired people. This helps people know what each section is about.¹⁷

Audio description is another way of making video accessible to visually impaired people. A narrator explains what is going on in the video. They speak when the people in the video are silent. The narrator's words are recorded on to the video after the video has been made. Audio description does not make the video longer. Audio described videos can be watched on an ordinary video receiver.¹⁸

Lots of companies put audio description on to their films and videos. It is becoming more popular now. People can borrow audio described videos from RNIB to watch at home.^{17, 18}

You can get advice on making videos accessible to visually impaired children and adults from the RNIB Broadcasting Unit. See the guidance section on 'Video' for more information about this topic.

Labelling audio and video information

Books, tapes, CDs and videos from shops have words and pictures on their covers to tell you what to expect.¹

You should also label audio and video information, so visually impaired people understand what it contains. You may need to get advice from the RNIB. Or a local organisation for blind and partially sighted people might help you.¹

It is important to label your audio or video recording carefully. You need to say who made the audio or video and how long it lasts. People find it helpful if you put labels on the box and on the tape, CD or video itself. You will need to include a picture or logo as well as words, for people who cannot read.¹

Some people like the printed information, audio and video to all look the same. You could produce them in the same colour. Putting the same pictures on the boxes helps people link audio and video with the print.¹

Some people with visual impairments cannot see print, logos or pictures. They need things labelled in braille or Moon.¹

6 **Supporters can help people with visual impairments to access information**

There are many practical ways to help people with visual impairments access information. Most of these cost nothing at all. People with learning disabilities need this help. They have a right to it.

Eye tests

Everyone should have an eye test with an optometrist or optician every 2 years or more often if the optometrist or optician says so. People with learning disabilities can find eye tests scary. They may need some preparation and support before, during and after the test itself.

Glasses

Supporters should help people to get the right glasses if they need them. Glasses need to be fitted by an optician or optometrist. People may not wear glasses that are uncomfortable or don't fit properly. Supporters need to know what glasses are for. Are they for near or for distance? Wearing the right glasses will help people see better.

Magnifiers or low vision aids

Some people might need other aids for reading or leisure such as magnifiers. Low vision clinics can help with these.

Eye operations

Some people with learning disabilities need eye operations to improve their sight. These days many operations are done on a day patient basis. People may go home on the same day as their operation. Other people spend just one or two night in hospital.

Environment and position

Think about where people are using information. Quiet places are usually better. Make sure people have enough light to see the information. Most people with visual impairments also find glare (from glass, mirrors or shiny surfaces) painful. People also need to be in the right physical position to make the best use of information. This might mean sitting very close to objects, or making sure someone's wheelchair is 'parked' in the way that suits them best.

You might need to get some more advice from a rehabilitation worker for visually impaired people. See the 'Resource section' for more information.

Prompts

People may find it easier to interpret what they are seeing if they know or are told what to expect. Some people with learning disabilities and visual impairments may need to be told clearly what is expected of them, and reminded to do things. They may need tactile or tape-recorded time-tables. Buildings with minor adaptations, such as markers placed underfoot or on doors remind people of routes. Labels on doors - either visual or tactile, or different door handles to denote different rooms - all help people to remember where they are.

There are lots of other practical ways to help people with visual impairments access information. See the RNIB Focus Factsheets on 'Understanding and using sight: issues for work with people with severe disabilities'⁶ and 'Access to eye care for people with learning difficulties'⁸ for more advice and information.

Resource section

The Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) has lots of resources to help you make information easier for people with learning disabilities who have visual impairments.

Address:

Royal National Institute of the Blind
105 Judd Street
London
WC1H 9NE

RNIB telephone helpline: 0845 766 9999

RNIB email helpline: helpline@rnib.org.uk

RNIB website: www.rnib.org.uk

RNIB advice and information about **accessible website design:** <http://rnib.org.uk/wac>

RNIB advice and information about **accessible information:** rnib.org.uk/seeitright or email Hugh Huddy, Best Practice Officer for Accessible Information:

Email: infoaccess@rnib.org.uk

Advice and information for **adults with learning disabilities and their supporters** is available from:

RNIB Multiple Disability Services

London Office:

Gill Levy
RNIB Multiple Disability Services
Falcon Park
Neasden Lane
London
NW10 1TB

Telephone: 020 8348 3533

Email: Gill.Levy@rnib.org.uk

Liverpool Office:

Laura Waite
RNIB Multiple Disability Services
The Gateway Centre
71 London Road
Liverpool L3 8HY

Telephone: 0151 298 3236

Email: Laura.Waite@rnib.org.uk

Rehabilitation workers are people who give advice to people with visual impairments or people with both visual and hearing impairments, and their supporters or family. They usually work for social services or a local voluntary organisation such as RNIB. They teach people skills, like how to move around safely. And they give advice about how to make it easier for people to see, or hear, at home or at work. They can give advice about how best to help people see or hear easy information. Contact the **RNIB helpline** for more details.

RNIB Information Services has a service for people with learning disabilities. It is called the Multiple Disability Team. They also have a training officer who gives training and advice to supporters working with people with learning disabilities and people who have both visual and hearing impairments. Contact Chris Smith, Administrative Officer, for more information:

Address:

RNIB

58-72 John Bright Street
Birmingham
B1 1BN

Telephone: 0121 665 4243

Email: Chris.smith@rnib.org.uk

Advice and information about **transcription into braille, tape and large print** is available from:

Address:

RNIB Transcription Centre Northwest

67 High Street
Tarporley
Cheshire
CW6 0DP

Telephone: 01829 732115

Email: tarporley@rnib.org.uk

Advice and information about transcription and production of over 25 copies of documents in braille, tape, Moon and large print is available from:

RNIB

PO Box 173
Peterborough
PE2 6WS

Telephone: 0845 702 3153

Email: cservices@rnib.org.uk

Advice and information about **screen-readers, large print software and computer equipment** is available from RNIB Hi Tech Officers:

Telephone: 020 7388 1266

Email: Paul.Porter@rnib.org.uk

Advice and information about **posting documents free for visually impaired people**: RNIB can supply you with sticky labels saying 'Articles for the Blind'. These can be used to send accessible material free of charge to visually impaired people with learning difficulties. Contact the **RNIB helpline** for more information.



Registered Charity Number: 226227

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

References

1. Evidence from Information for All interviews, 2003.
2. RNIB. Looking for eye problems in people with learning difficulties. Focus Factsheet. London: RNIB; 1998.
3. RNIB. Questions to ask the optometrist after the eye test of an adult with learning difficulties or who has no obvious means of communication. Focus Factsheet. London: RNIB; 2000.
4. NHS Executive. Signposts for success in Commissioning and Providing Health Services for People with Learning Disabilities. London: Department of Health; 1997.
5. RNIB. Clear Print Guidelines. London: RNIB; 1997.
6. RNIB. Understanding and using sight: issues for work with people with severe disabilities. Focus Factsheet. London: RNIB; undated.
7. RNIB. See it Right. London: RNIB; 2002.

-
8. RNIB. Access to eye care for people with learning difficulties. Focus Factsheet. London: RNIB; 1998.
 9. RNIB. Glasses for adults with severe learning difficulties. Focus Factsheet. London: RNIB; 1997.
 10. RNIB. Minimising problems in eye surgery for adults with severe learning difficulties. Focus Factsheet. London: RNIB; undated.
 11. RNIB. Low vision services for people with learning difficulties. Focus Factsheet. London: RNIB; 1998.
 12. RNIB. RNIB Tape Services. London: RNIB; 1993.
 13. Barker P, Fraser J. Sign Design Guide - A Guide to Inclusive Signage. London: JMU and the Sign Design Society; 2000.
 14. Knight C. Moon - a route to communication and literacy. Focus, 24, July 1998. p.3

-
15. National Information Forum. How to provide information well - a good practice guide. London: National Information Forum; 1996.
 16. London Boroughs Disability Resource Team. Access Pack: An Access Guide to Conferences and Events for Disabled People. London: London Boroughs Disability Resource Team; 1991.
 17. RNIB. Making Video Material Accessible. Good Practice Guide for Videos Being Produced for Corporate, Educational and Training Use. Unpublished internal document. London: RNIB; 2001.
 18. Independent Television Commission. ITC Guidance on Standards for Audio Description. London: ITC; 2000.
 19. RNIB. Getting Your Message Across to Customers with Sight Problems. London: RNIB; 2001.

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



Norah Fry
Research Centre

