

## When you get something you can't read or understand. . .

Here are some things to try when you get something you cannot read or understand. Everyone is different and some of these ideas may be too easy or too hard for you. But you may find just the hint you need. This list may even help you think of something else that works better for you. Please write and tell us what you find useful.

At one time or another, we all receive something that is difficult to read or understand. Here are a few ways people try to give us important information:

- **Letters:** it is the job of the letter writer to use words the readers can understand. No one should feel badly if they get something they cannot read.

A letter may look something like this:

Stubliness and Sons Corporation, Heating and Ventilation Services  
44083, 532 Wentworth Cres. NE  
Abernockwald, SK  
S6E 7J1

Re: Overdue payment

Dear Customer,

It has come to our attention that your payment for our services remains overdue. A speedy response would be appreciated. If we have not heard from you within seven (7) days, we will initiate legal action against you.

Yours sincerely,

Joe Thankless  
(Managing Director)

- **Papers to sign:** Someone may ask you to sign a document. This may be a consent form for a medical test or surgery, a rent agreement, a bank loan, or some other legal form. Never sign anything unless you understand it.

A legal paper may look something like this:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>TRANSITIONAL RESIDENCE RENTAL AGREEMENT</b></p> <p>This rental agreement made in duplicate this ____ day of ____, 20__ between:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">JMP RENTALS and</p> <p style="text-align: center;">_____</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Resident</p> <p>1. PREMISES AND NATURE OF AGREEMENT</p> <p>JMP Rentals agrees to rent to the resident and the resident agrees to rent from JMP Rentals the unit known as: _____</p> <p>2. TERM (Month to Month)</p> <p>The term of this agreement is from the ___ day of ____, 20__, to the last day of the same month and continuing on a 'month to month' basis thereafter, not exceeding 24 months.</p> <p>And so on.</p>
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- **Public notices:** These may be notices in a newspaper, or posted on the street. Remember, lots of people need to read public notices. When something is too hard to read, tell the office where the notice came from if you can. Try to find someone to help you read it.

A public notice may look something like this:

## **Town Hall Meeting**

Tuesday, November 25, 2003 at 7:30 pm.

Come out to hear about development plans for our sports complex and business area.

Speakers: Dennis Omniscient, Regional Planner  
May Stafford, Lawyer  
Robin Matthews

Discussion to follow

Meeting will be held at:  
Hildebrand Community Centre

Light refreshments will be served

- **Brochures:** If there is no one you can ask about brochures that are too hard to read, do not worry too much. Brochures may have information in them that is useful, but they are not as important as letters.

A brochure is folded. It may look something like this:

<p><b>Diabetes and You</b></p>	<p><b>What is diabetes?</b></p> <p>When you have diabetes, your body does not use the sugar you eat in the right way. You can have too much or too little sugar in your blood. When you learn what to do about this, you can stay well.</p> <p>There are different kinds of diabetes. We will talk about type 2 diabetes (sometimes called adult-onset diabetes). This kind starts after you have grown up.</p> <p><b>Why have I got diabetes?</b></p> <p>It is not known how people get diabetes. But here are some things that make it more likely:</p> <p>If other people in your family have diabetes, this may happen to you, too.</p> <p>If you do not eat well, you may get it.</p>	<p><b>Food</b></p> <p>What you eat is very important. Here are some tips:</p> <p>Eat at the same time each day.</p> <p>Eat lots of vegetables.</p> <p>Drink six to eight glasses of water each day.</p> <p>Have no more than one fruit at each meal.</p> <p>If you want to snack, pick something like plain popcorn.</p> <p>Cut down on salt.</p> <p>Cut down on sugar. Use artificial sweetener instead.</p> <p>Do not have more than one cup of milk or yogurt at a meal.</p>
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## What to do if you get something that is hard to read

- First, make sure the document is for you. Perhaps it was put in the wrong mail box, and you cannot understand it because it is someone else's business. Or it may be for someone else in your home.
- OK, it really is for you. Now look to see who it came from. If it is a business letter, it should have a company address at the top of the first page. That may help you work out what is in the document. Then see who wrote the letter – the writer's name is at the end of the letter. Maybe you know the person.
- Look at the heading below the sender's name and address. That may help. If it is a letter, there may be a word – spelled "Re" – followed by a few words. *Re* means **About**. The words after will say what the letter is about. Some people use **Subject**, not *Re*.

This is what it looks like:

Re: Heating rebate

*or*

Subject: Heating rebate

- Look at any headings in the document. The first one is often in bigger or darker print than the rest of the words. It says what the document is about. You may also see small headings for smaller sections. Read as many as you can, as they can all help you understand.
- Look over the pages quickly. Maybe you can pick out some words which give you some idea of what the document is about. Do not worry if you cannot read every word when you do this.
- You may find a dictionary useful. You can look up a word to find what it means. But dictionaries are not always a help. Sometimes they use even harder words and often the print is very small. They are just one way to find out what was written.

- Look at any pictures in the document. If they are clear, they can help you understand.
- Now try to go through each line and section. It may help if you put a ruler or pencil under each line when you read it. Maybe mark words you do not get, so you can look at them again, or ask someone.
- Use a magnifying glass if the print is small. And make sure there is good light for you to read by. That can make a big difference.
- Ask someone you trust to help you. Try to find someone who can read business or legal documents.

### **Other things you can do**

Now, let us look at what can be done to make hard-to-read documents easier for lots of readers. It is really important that the people who wrote them know that they need to make changes.

- If there is time, send the document back to the writer, with a note that says the document is too hard to understand.
- You can phone the office it was sent from and say the same thing. Someone there should then tell you what was in the letter. That is a help, but sometimes it is hard to remember everything you hear. Also, if there is trouble later, the written document will be more important than what you remember.
- Take a friend or someone else you trust if you go into the office to speak to someone. He or she can give you support and help you remember what the office person said.
- Ask to speak to a top person in the office if you do not get the help you need.

- If that does not work, call or write to the top person in the business. This is the president or the CEO (the chief executive officer).

If it is a government office, write to the government about the problem. You have the right to understand. Your public library can give you the name and address of the government people to write to. You can also phone or send e-mails.

- You may need to make a big fuss. That's OK. You may help lots of other people as well as yourself. Many people who write documents for the public need to learn how difficult it is to write in words that are easy to read.
- If you are asked to sign a legal paper and you do not understand what it says, be careful. Ask to have it explained carefully. Better still, if you have time, say you will not sign it until it has been written in a way that you can understand.
- If it is a legal document, and there is no time for it to be written again, have someone you trust go over it with you before you sign it.
- It is a lot of work to ask again and again for documents that are easy to read. And it takes guts. Sometimes you may feel you want to give up. But remember you can help others as well as yourself if you keep at it.

Good luck!