Who Do We Think We Are Talking To?

How many times do we see something that we want to read? Maybe it is a note from our children's school. The nurse may give us a paper about some tests we need. We see a poster at our job about new safety rules or working hours. We get a letter in the mail about our pension, our citizenship or our family allowance checks.

A lot of this kind of information is hard to understand. Even when we understand what the words say, we may not understand what they mean. We may be able to read the words, but still not know what we are supposed to do.

If we read well, we can most likely work it out in the end. If we cannot read well, then we may be in trouble. After a while, we may decide to stop trying to understand the words and to figure out what is happening some other way.

When we cannot read well enough to make sense out of the information that we are given every day, we may be called "functionally illiterate." People in the government, in business and the schools then talk about "the literacy problem." And it is true that many women want to read and write better. We know that we can not have the kind of life we want unless we improve our skills.

Many other women work in literacy programs, in community services, in unions and as teachers to help learners with reading and writing. I am one of these women. I work as a tutor, as a writer and I do research for a literacy council.

So — I am one of those people who work with "the literacy problem."

I also work with another problem — "the readability problem." Here, I look at how people write the information that we want or need to read. I look at how they do not seem to pay attention to the real lives of their readers.

When the school teachers write notes for children to take home, when hospitals write instructions for medical tests, when work managers write safety notices or the government people send out letters — they do not seem to think about who they are talking to.

They write as if everyone has a lot of education and understands how things like schools and governments work. They write as if everyone is white, speaks English, has money, a job, a safe house to live in and an easy way to get to their offices.

So when I try to work with other women on this problem, I am trying to help people learn how to use clear language — language that most people can understand. I try to make people who write see what happens when they write in a way that many people cannot understand.

They do not get their message across. They make other people feel angry and stupid. They keep all their information for themselves and for other people just like them. They do not share what they know. They stop other people from learning what everyone needs to know.

It is one thing to write to a special friend, or a person who does the same kind of work that we do, or to our teacher. Then we can write any way that this other person understands. Even if no one else understands what we say, we will still get our message across to the person we want to talk to.
But if we want a lot of different kinds of people to understand what we are saying, then we need to think about how we are saying it.

I care about clear language for all information that "the general public" is supposed to read. I especially care about clear language for all information that "women" need to read. This includes information about childcare, our health, our rights as workers, or our right to a safe place to live. It includes information about meetings, about parties, about community services and art and music.

What does it mean that so much of this information is difficult to find in the first place and difficult to understand once we find it? What does this difficulty say about the rights of all women to have the same kinds of information?

Some women say they write the way they do because that is what they learned in school or that is how they have to write because that is what they learned about the rights of all women to have the same rights as workers, or our right to a safe place to live. It includes information about meetings, about parties, about community services and art and music.

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I think we need to ask some questions about who we want to read our writing. We need to wonder about who the women are.

Are they young or old? Are they white women? Are they Women of Colour? Native women? Black women? How do we know what race these women are?

Are these women working in paid jobs? What kind of jobs? How well do they read? Do they like to read? Do they live in families? What kind of families do they have? Are they lesbian? Do they have children? Are these women physically disabled? Do they pay for our writing or do they pick it up somewhere? Where do they live? Why do they live there?

What kind of music do these women like? Do they dance? Do they laugh a lot? Do they like to eat good food? What kind of food? Are they fat women?

What do we need to know about women that will help us write well for them?

Many women say that we can not write for all the women, everywhere. If we try to include everyone, we get too many details and we are sure to leave out somebody. But if we are too general, nobody feels included and the writing seems boring and useless.

I agree that it is hard to write for every woman in everything we do. On the other hand, I also think it is too easy to write as if there is just one group of women — the women who are like the writer.

It is true. We know what we look like. We know if we go to school, if we work, if we have very much money. We know what kinds of families we have, what kinds of things we like to eat, where we go shopping and who washes our clothes.

We know about ourselves. But what do we know about anyone who is different from ourselves? And if we know some things about other women, how did we find out? Did we talk to women who are different from ourselves and ask them about their lives? Did we ask them what they want to read about? Did we ask them if they can understand what we say when we talk? Did we show them some of our writing and ask them what they think about it?

If we do not know the women we are writing for, how are we going to know how to talk with them? Why are we writing for them, anyway? Why do we think we know enough about anyone else’s lives to write things that are important for them?

These are very hard questions. And we can decide not to answer them. We can decide that we can not write for anyone who is different from ourselves and just carry on writing like we always did.

Or we can start writing with women who are different from ourselves.
We can learn how to look for words and ideas that women may not understand because their lives are different from the lives of the women who are writing.

So, step number four is to take the time to learn how to write so that more women can understand what we are saying. We also need to ask — what does it mean if we are not willing to take this time.

Step 6: If we test our writing with other women, we are going to hear that there are some problems with it.

Are women who write are learning to ask who they want to read what they write. If we think about this clearly, we will know where to find some of these readers. We can go to see them and ask and tell them what can ask — what does it mean if we are not willing to take this time.

On the other hand, we do want other women to understand what we are saying. And the only way we are going to find out if someone understands is to ask them.

I think this is the most important step of all. We can always learn a lot by taking what we write to different women and asking for their advice. If we hear what they say, we will get better and better at writing clearly.

So, step number five is test our writing with the women who want to read it.

If we want to be sure we are doing the best job that we can, we need to spend some time learning how to write clearly. We can learn about writing stories instead of ideas. We can learn about active verbs and concrete nouns and sentences that have subjects. We can learn about colons and commas and contractions and hyphens.

We can learn about white space and type sizes and how much space to leave between the lines.

We can count how many syllables there are in each word we use. We can count how many words there are in each sentence. We can count how many sentences are in each paragraph.

We say we do not want to insult our readers by being too easy to understand.

Sometimes we say women need to learn how to read important and complicated words and ideas. It will be good for us to teach others the kinds of words that we know. Or, we say we do not have time to change the writing. We just have to get the information out.

I think we need to look at all these reasons and find out which ones are true and which ones are excuses. I think we also need to look at this question —

What happens if we do not change our writing after we find out other women can not or will not read it?

One thing that is going to happen is that many women are not going to read what we write. Are we saying, then, that we will not change? Are we deciding that how we write and how we feel about our writing are more important than sharing our information?

I think we need to make sure we understand what we are doing if we make this decision. We do not have any right to pretend that we are trying to write for many different women if we decide to write only for those who are just like us. We can not say one thing and do another thing.

So, step number six is to be honest about who we want to write for and how we want to change our writing. If we do not change when women tell us they have problems, we need to look at what that means.

I think it is very hard to change how we write. How we use words is part of who we are in this world. How we use words is part of our power and part of our powerlessness. Some of us have the power of words and it is very hard to let that go!

Maybe we can not let go. In that case, I believe we need to admit that out loud and look at what happens. Who will be standing on the side of those people who have the power? Who will be standing on the side of those people who do not have the power?

Betty-Ann Lloyd is a Halifax writer and editor who is currently doing some research on literacy and the community college system in Nova Scotia.