
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 can not 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.

BY BETTY-ANN LLOYD

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 at their jobs. When they leave school or their jobs and do work with women, they can not stop writing that way. They do not

of writing. Sometimes this also means we have to learn new ways of thinking about who we are in the world.

I have worked out some questions writers can ask when they begin to write something for other women to read. I do not think that these are the best questions or the only questions. I am still learning a lot about new ways of writing myself. But, I do think we need to start somewhere.

These are also questions that other women might ask when they find something they can not understand. If we could start to ask these questions of each other, just think what might happen! Posters, booklets, papers, notices that are clear and easy to read! Information we can actually understand!

I use the word "we" when I am talking about both the writer and the reader. I do not think there is one group of women who write and one group of women who read. I think most of us have trouble finding writing that makes sense in our lives. So we are all readers who have

we still can not understand what they mean.

If we want the information and we do not get it for any of these reasons, we may feel left out. We may feel like no one cares whether we understand or not. We can get angry and we can get sad and feel alone.

How do we feel when we are the writer? We may feel important — or we may feel angry and sad and alone because not enough women are reading our words.

Whose problem is it that some women do *not* read and understand what other women write?

We can say that women who can not read or understand our writing have a problem. They can be labelled "functionally illiterate." They can go to programs that teach reading.

But we can also look at the problem in a different way. We can say that those of us who write have a problem. We can be labelled "functionally unreadable" because other women can not understand

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know any other way to write.

But most of us can talk to other women, face-to-face. We can pay attention to who the other women are if we sit across a table and chat. So why can't we write the way we speak? When we are putting out women's booklets or papers or posters, why don't we just sit down and write the way we talk?

What have we got to lose?

Many of us have learned that if we do not write in a certain way we will not sound important. So — if we keep writing in "important-sounding" ways, does this mean we need other women to think we are important? Do we need to think we are more important than the women we want to talk to?

I think that most women do want to write in ways that other women can understand. We do want to talk with one another as much as we can. But, this means many of us have to learn new ways

trouble. Many of us reading this article are also writers. We try to use words and writing to talk about what is important in our lives. We also have the power that comes with being able to write.

Each one of us needs to understand who we are in these questions. The more we can see ourselves and others, the easier it will be to talk.

Step 1: Here is a simple question to ask —

What happens when women write something that many other women do not understand?

There are three main reasons that women do not understand information. We may not know how to read the words. We may not think the words have anything to do with our lives, so we ignore them. We may be able to read the words and we may want to read the words, but

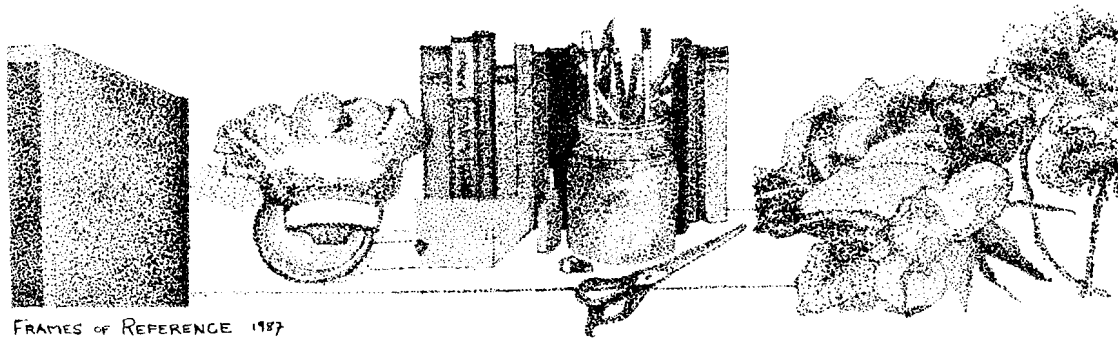
what we write. We are using words and sentences and talking about ideas in a way that does not make sense to many other women.

In the end, all women who want to talk with each other by using words and writing have a problem when the writing gets in the way. But the writers are the women who can change most easily. It is most often the women who write who have the kind of power that allows us to change what we are doing.

So, the first step is to think about what actually happens when some women can not read what other women write.

Step 2: If we are women who write — who do we want to read our writing?

I think a lot of us who write start to put down words before we really think about why we are writing and who we are writing *for*. Instead of starting right away,



FRAMES OF REFERENCE 1987

Janice Andreae
Frames of Reference, 1987
 ink on paper [actual size]

Editor's Note: Janice Andreae is a Guest Editor for our forthcoming *Canadian Women Artists* issue (Vol. 10, No. 3). For a brief biographical note, see p. 76 of this issue.

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. They

will tell us, as we write together, that we are not writing about the lives of women like them.

Or we can start to say... "This is what I know. This is the information I have. Do you want it or need it? What else do you want or need? Maybe we have that information too. Or maybe we know how to get it."

In any case, I think we can not stop asking the questions or finding new questions to ask. Step number two is to keep asking, even if it is hard!

Step 3: Here is another question —

What happens when women write as if we are *talking with* other women?

When we sit down to talk with someone, we do not talk as if we are alone. We may try to think about what our friend already knows about what we are saying. We try to think about what she wants to know. Maybe we think about what she needs to know.

And if we do not know what she wants or needs, we can ask her! Maybe we should ask her even if we think we do know. We may be wrong!

So, step number three is to sit down and write as if we are talking to someone. If we do not know much about our readers, we can ask them what they want to know.

Step 4: What do we do when we discover women can not read what we write?

How much time are we willing to spend learning how to write in a way that more women can understand?

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 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 5: How will we know if we are writing more clearly? How will we decide if more women can read what we write?

Will we test our writing with different women *before* we make a lot of copies of it?

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 them to tell us what they think of what we have done.

This can be a very hard thing to do. It is hard to write things as clearly as we can. When we finally get something on paper, we do not always want to change it.

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 that we want to read it.

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

Are we going to change our writing after we test it?

Many women who write say we do want to write in a way that other women will understand. But, when we find out that many of the women we want to read our writing are having problems, we find it hard to change.

Sometimes, we say our ideas are hard to understand because they are so important and complicated. We say there is no clear way to write these ideas. Sometimes, 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.