Tips for Providing Services to Clients with Low-Literacy Skills

- Get contact information of a family member or friend who can help client prepare materials at home or who can read/write for client, if necessary;
- If materials need to be mailed back to the office, mail out a test packet first to allow client to practice the routine;
- Provide labels/already addressed envelopes if mailing is necessary;
- Give clear and concise explanations and instructions. Avoid acronyms;
- Move from simple to more complex tasks when explaining what a client needs to do;
- Develop a process chart using pictures to better show what steps need to happen and when;
- If producing multiple instruction sheets using pictures, make sure pictures/images have the same meaning in all documents.
- Repeat. Repeat. Repeat;
- Ask client to repeat and explain what steps he/she needs to do next;
- If using several forms, color code them so that the client can identify the form without using the words or numbers listed on the paper;

Signs of a Client with Low-Literacy Skills
(Information taken primarily from ProLiteracy America Online Information Center)

- Frequent questions when filling out paperwork;
- Frequent excuses for not reading or writing, such as forgetting glasses or hurting a hand;
- Requests for verbal information rather than mailed literature;
- Failing to adhere to written instructions;
- Failure to complete forms beyond name and address;
- Writing very little or misspelling a lot of words;
- Avoiding situations or participation in activities in which he/she might have to read or write;
- Trying to take paperwork home to fill it out or get someone else to complete;
- Rarely responding to written messages;
- Indicating that a spouse handles “those” matters;
- When giving directions somewhere, describing landmarks rather than signs or asking for a visual map instead of written directions;
- Asking for directions when they are clearly marked instructions;
- Asking for verbal directions about what is needed to be done, even when instructions are available in writing;
• An unwillingness to read aloud or fill out paperwork (making excuses so others would offer to complete forms or papers);
• Claiming to have not received a written correspondence;
• Stating that one didn’t have time to read correspondence; blaming being too busy or too pressured with deadlines, and asking others to tell them what’s written;
• Claiming print is too small;
• Asking others to spell even the most common words.

**How to Discuss Low-Literacy Needs with Client**

It is important that the caseworker knows if a client has difficulty reading and writing. Information about literacy levels could be part of the conversation that takes place during the initial contact meeting or shortly thereafter. The topic should be discussed in a one-on-one conversation.

**Quick Tips for Writing Materials Accessible for all Clients**
(http://www.joe.org/joe/2001february/tt2.html)

Organizations can make materials that reach audiences of all literacy levels. The following are suggestions when making sure materials can be used by clients with low levels of literacy.

1. Keep writing style simple.
2. Use active voice and conversational style.
3. Sequence main points in a logical manner.
4. Make your sub-points clearly correspond to the main point.
5. Use short words and sentences.
6. Avoid double negative expressions.
7. Use the same word consistently rather than synonyms to avoid confusion.
8. For lengthy materials, use a table of contents to point the way.
9. Write short summaries at the end of long sections.
10. Use a larger type than 12 points for the text.
11. Enlarge or bold the type in headings and subheadings.
12. Use extra white space to separate sections.
13. Use age appropriate illustrations.
14. Place illustrations close to the related text.
15. Use simple grids, site maps, and other visuals to ease the reading of text.