

Reading Writing Hotline research: helping clients fill in forms

by *Vanessa Iles and Robin Miles*



This article highlights key findings of the 2020 *Helping Clients Fill in Forms Report*. The full text of the report is available on the Reading Writing Hotline website: <https://www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au> (via the “About Us” tab) or via the URL in References at the end of this article.

In 2020 the Reading Writing Hotline partnered with the NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) to undertake research conducted by Social Equity Works into the demand for, and impact of, form filling support provided by community service organisations around NSW to clients with literacy challenges. The research found that the demand for literacy mediation support for clients is high and increasing due to bushfires, drought, and COVID-19. This work impacts on staff, services, and clients across the community service sector in NSW. It also found that this impact is further exacerbated by the move by government departments to make their forms accessible online. Clients’ literacy challenges can disadvantage them in accessing essential government services.

‘Leanne’ and the impact of COVID-19

‘Leanne’ has recently started working as a family wellbeing support person but is struggling with reading and writing. Literacy has always been her big challenge, but she was never able to attend classes because she needed an income. Leanne started her new job two weeks before the COVID-19 lockdown. Now she is working from home, and suddenly there is an increase in emails, case notes and forms for financial assistance, in addition to other online demands. Centrelink was unable to help her. “I don’t want to give up my job,” she kept repeating, “but I feel like a failure.”

Jake’s battles with jargon

Forms are difficult for Jake to understand due to the legal jargon and complex language used. There is also a lot of stress about misunderstanding a form or requirements and making a mistake.

Jake says that communicating with NSW Housing can be very overwhelming and there is a lot of pressure to “not get

anything wrong”. He says the community service worker not only explains and helps him to fill in forms but also advocates for his needs.

Jake thinks he could fill out the forms by himself “if they didn’t have such complicated language” and “if there were no ‘trick’ questions” that made him second guess his answers. He contacted NSW Housing to ask for assistance and was told it was “not their job” to assist people to fill in the forms.

A growing problem

Form filling is a vital and basic step in accessing government services. While many of us can find digital and paper-based forms hard to navigate, people with lower literacy skills find that without assistance, forms can be a barrier to accessing housing, bushfire relief and COVID-19 financial assistance.

The requirement to complete increasingly complex, paper-based and online forms in order to access services and support means that individuals with lower literacy levels are at an increased risk of disadvantage. Data collected from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Survey of Adult Skills in 2013 suggests that 14% of Australians aged 15 to 74 (almost 2.8 million people) have very low literacy levels, which may make it hard for them to cope with the literacy requirements of everyday life. Another 30% have literacy levels which would make it difficult to complete the majority of the top ten forms listed in the report (Reading Writing Hotline & NCOSS, 2020, p.4), which require literacy levels above Australian Core Skills Framework Level 2 to complete.

Many government departments offer little or no support to fill in their forms. Recently, forms have increased in number



Jake shared his story in the 2020 Filling in Forms Report.
Image supplied by Social Equity Works

and difficulty, and are now mostly digitised/online. People with lower literacy and digital skills are now even more vulnerable to disconnection from crucial services like health and housing. They seek help with forms from frontline workers in community organisations and public libraries.

The research suggests that difficulties accessing online forms and services are exacerbated by digital exclusion, especially in rural and remote locations. Digital exclusion can include:

- no access to home computers
- no email address
- inability to afford data
- limited access to public computers due to COVID-19 closure of public libraries
- inexperience in using computers.

Digital exclusion was particularly noted as an issue for older adults and in communities that lack basic resources and infrastructure. This may include Aboriginal communities and those with high proportions of refugees and recently arrived migrants.

The Reading Writing Hotline has seen an increase in calls from community workers seeking assistance for their clients facing literacy barriers. Clients reported finding the forms difficult to navigate. They said the forms displayed too much information on each page, used technical language and gave confusing instructions.

COVID-19 and bushfires have created greater demand for support from people who may not have accessed services or engaged with the social services sector before.

Insights from the research highlight that the community sector has responded in innovative and flexible ways to

provide literacy support to clients and assist them to engage with complex processes and access essential services. The different ways that this support is provided include through one-on-one casework; offering a regular stand-alone 'form filling' service; and deploying an outreach model where a community worker is based in a library. However, community organisations also indicated that their literacy mediation role is generally not recognised by their funding bodies and has to be 'squeezed in' among other service offerings, funded through donations or delivered by volunteers.

Social Equity Works has used Sally Thompson's 2015 research with Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria as a launching point for this work. This research found that staff from Neighbourhood Houses acted as literacy mediators and were spending "around 10 hours per week on the provision of this informal literacy support." (Thompson, 2015, p. 485). Thompson's research also found that the time spent on this assistance was increasing and that the digitisation of many bureaucratic documents adds another layer of difficulty for people with low literacy levels. Much of this work performed by Neighbourhood Houses staff is informal, unfunded and largely hidden. It is absorbed in the day-to-day support services provided to clients and therefore adds an unreasonable burden to staff and to budgets.

Project focus

Social Equity Works examined the extent of demand for, and impact of, form filling support provided by community service organisations around NSW to clients with literacy challenges. Services were asked to comment on these questions:

- How much literacy support is provided to clients of community organisations to help them with forms to access essential services?
- What extra demands are placed on community services by this assistance?
- Which forms are most problematic?
- What models of support are services currently providing?
- What would help reduce the impact of lower literacy on services and their clients?

Methodology

The project used a mixed mode methodology involving an online survey of 70 community organisations from across NSW and eight libraries in the City of Sydney library network; a focus group and follow-up interviews with six



An ABC News story on 26 December 2020 highlighted the complexity of some government forms. The story can be viewed on the Reading Writing Hotline Facebook Page (video uploaded on 29 December 2020). Image supplied by Reading Writing Hotline

survey respondents; and two case studies which included interviews with clients, volunteers and staff. Advice was also sought from the NSW Council for Intellectual Disability on practical ways to improve the form most frequently cited by survey respondents as necessitating literacy mediation. (Reading Writing Hotline & NCOSS, 2020, p.1)

Findings

The report found that filling in forms creates demand for literacy assistance that presents issues for individuals, community organisations and governments.

Issues for individuals

- Understanding the purpose of the form
- Interpreting instructions
- Completing all fields accurately
- Accessing support material
- Scanning and uploading documentation
- Overcoming digital exclusion – no home computer, can't afford data, can't access public computers, no email address, no experience using computers.

Issues for community organisations

- Helping clients with forms is a significant task – workers may spend up to six hours a day supporting individuals.

- The literacy mediation role is not recognised by funding bodies – must be 'squeezed in' or done by volunteers.
- 100% of respondents report that digital literacy is a barrier for their clients accessing services.
- 92% say literacy and numeracy challenges affect clients' quality of life.
- Areas requiring most support with forms are: social housing, disability support and NDIS, personal identification, Centrelink, medical services.

Issues for governments

- Guidelines have been developed by governments to ensure material is easy to read and accessible but these do not seem to be consistently applied.
- Other practical supports are needed for people with low literacy.
- Community organisations' literacy mediation role needs to be recognised and resourced.

The recommendations, based on the findings, are to encourage government agencies to develop forms that can be more easily understood and completed by those who face literacy challenges; provide other practical supports that will make it easier for people with low levels of literacy to access essential services; and recognise and resource community organisations in their literacy mediation role.

References

- Reading Writing Hotline & NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS). (2020). *2020 Helping Clients Fill in Forms Report*. Social Equity Works. Retrieved from <https://www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Helping-Clients-Fill-in-Forms-Research-2020.pdf>
- Thompson, S. (2015). Literacy mediation in neighbourhood houses. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 55 (3): 478–495.

Vanessa Iles is Manager of the Reading Writing Hotline.
Robin Miles is Director of Social Equity Works.