

Literacy Matters

Keeping you up to date with literacy news in Ireland and informing you of the work NALA is doing



Literacy and Citizenship

Mairead McGuinness says literacy helps us become better citizens of Ireland and Europe.

Also:

- Lisa Banks and Thomas Campbell share their stories at our Student Days
- How to use creative writing and reading for adult learning
- Tips to help you be media smart





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On the cover:

Literacy student Lee Mitchell, from Kildare and Wicklow ETB, with Mairead McGuinness MEP at NALA's AGM in April.

Welcome

to our latest edition of **Literacy Matters**.



First things first, we would love to hear what you think about this magazine. Please see our survey on page seven to find out how you can give us your feedback and suggestions. Everybody who completes our survey will also have the chance to win a €100 National Book Token.

We were delighted to welcome so many of our members to our AGM in April. Mairead McGuinness, MEP and Vice President of the European Parliament, was guest speaker at the event. On page four you can read why Mairead thinks that literacy and numeracy can help us become better citizens of Ireland and Europe.

There was great excitement earlier this year when the winners of our Plain English Awards were announced. On page eight you can find out who took home the coveted first place trophy.

During the last few months we have been lucky to hear from many learners who want to share their stories about improving their literacy skills. On page 12, Lisa Banks from Kilkenny and Carlow ETB, and Thomas Campbell from Laois and Offaly ETB, talk about how going back to education has changed their lives. On page 14, Cornelius

Hickey from Tipperary ETB talks about how NALA's distance learning service helped him overcome his fear of reading and writing.

This issue also has lots of useful tips for teaching and learning literacy. On page 18 you can read about how to develop your critical literacy skills. On page 26 we look at how creative writing workshops can help literacy students. On page 18, children's author Neil Griffiths shows you how to release your inner performer when reading to children.

If you have a story for Literacy Matters please email Patrick Gleeson at pgleeson@nala.ie

Best wishes from all the team at NALA.

Louise Canavan, Communications Officer with the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland and NALA Board member with literacy student Michael Power.



Literacy changes lives

Mairead McGuinness MEP talks about how literacy and numeracy skills help people play an active role as citizens of Ireland and Europe.

It was a pleasure to welcome Mairead McGuinness, MEP and Vice President of the European Parliament, to give the keynote address at our AGM in April. Mairead touched on a wide range of topics in her speech including the importance of both health literacy and digital literacy. Mairead also spoke about Brexit and why it highlights how critical thinking and critical literacy skills are more important now than ever before.

“When it comes to the essential skills of literacy and numeracy, we know that too many citizens are left behind. They are left

in a cold isolated place and the world is more challenging to navigate as a result. Adult education will help them improve their skills and play a more active role in society,” said Mairead.

“Across Europe the extent that people don’t have the literacy and numeracy skills to engage in society is quite shocking. More politicians need to hear about what needs to be done to help people improve their literacy and numeracy skills and I will spread the word.”



“More politicians need to hear about what needs to be done to help people improve their literacy.”

Mairead McGuinness MEP

Digital literacy in the 21st century

Mairead pointed to her own experience with technology to highlight how easy it is for someone to struggle with the skills needed for 21st century life.

“I am self-taught when it comes to things like using smart phones and social media. I can do a lot but I have to work really hard at it because I didn’t grow up with those things. Sometimes when it comes to using technology I find it faster to just ask someone to do it for me, so I am a little bit worried that I’m going to lose the skills I’ve built up because I’m not using them every day. We can become so reliant on others that we end up losing our own skills. I think back to my parents and how they used to get the kids to use the remote for the telly because they found it confusing. And of course this can happen to someone who doesn’t use their literacy or numeracy skills every day too. Our brains get rusty and we can forget things.”

Mairead also wondered about the effects technology can have on people’s ability to talk and listen to each other, two essential elements of good communication. “I look at my own children and worry that they won’t have developed the necessary verbal skills because they are just tweeting and texting all the time instead of having face to face conversations with people,” she said.

The importance of critical literacy

As Vice President of the European Parliament, Mairead has been involved in many discussions and debates about Brexit. Brexit, which is short for 'British exit', is the word people use to talk about the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union. At our AGM, she told NALA members that the Brexit process highlights the dangers of people not having the critical thinking skills that are needed to make informed decisions.

“One of the big issues across Europe, and globally, is how all of us, as citizens, can develop the art of critical thinking. There has been such a rapid change in technology and the media in the last 25 years, and as a result, we are overwhelmed with information all of the time. Everybody, including people with literacy and numeracy difficulties, needs to know how to process and analyse the information they receive, whether it’s through traditional news outlets such as newspapers and television, or online on social media.”

“A lot of the confusion that has arisen over Brexit is down to the fact that many people in the UK did not have the critical thinking skills necessary to analyse the information they received. Unfortunately that is a reflection of the society we live in now where everything moves so fast and there is little time for in-depth analysis. In my job I get



Lee Mitchell, a student at Kildare and Wicklow ETB; Dr Inez Bailey, CEO, NALA; Mairead McGuinness MEP; and Mary Bambrick, Chairperson, NALA, launch our new annual report at our AGM.

journalists phoning me all the time looking for a comment on this report or that report but I always say that I want to read it first before I comment. If I don't read things properly or analyse what information I am given, then I run the risk of distorting the truth when I do give a comment and that is very dangerous," she said.

Today, many of us receive our news through articles posted on social media and critical thinking skills can help you decide if the information is trustworthy.

"People are not reading in-depth articles in newspapers the way they once were. My kids get most of their news from social media and I always tell them to remember that the issues being discussed aren't flat like they appear on the screen. To get the real story, you always have to look beyond the headlines and the soundbites and ask questions of the information you are given. That's why critical thinking skills are so important, they enable people to ask questions and not just accept something is true or accurate because they read it somewhere. Critical thinking can also help people find a middle ground on issues that initially seem to be very divisive. That

is one very important thing I have learned during my time in the European Parliament."

Changing people's lives

Mairead finished up her address at our AGM by commending people who return to education to improve their literacy, numeracy, maths or technology skills.

"It is not an easy thing to do but I am sure that there are people in this room that feel elevated because they did it, they took the first step to go back to education. And by coming here today you are saying that you want to be involved in making decisions that affect your life. You want to be involved in shaping the world of adult literacy and as a result your contribution will help many others who want to improve their literacy, numeracy or digital skills."

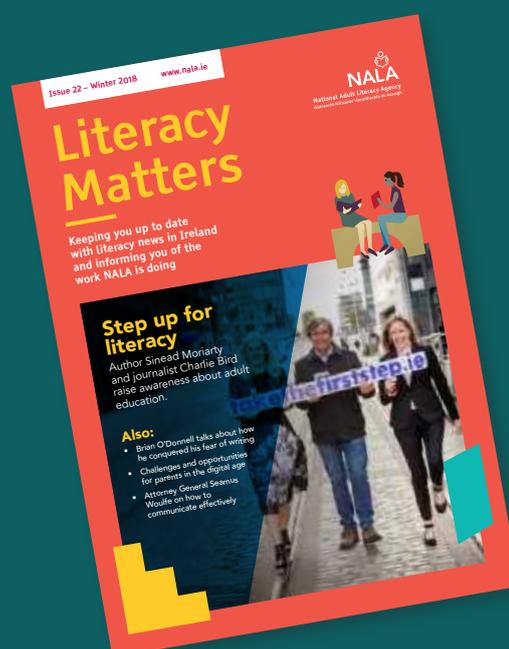
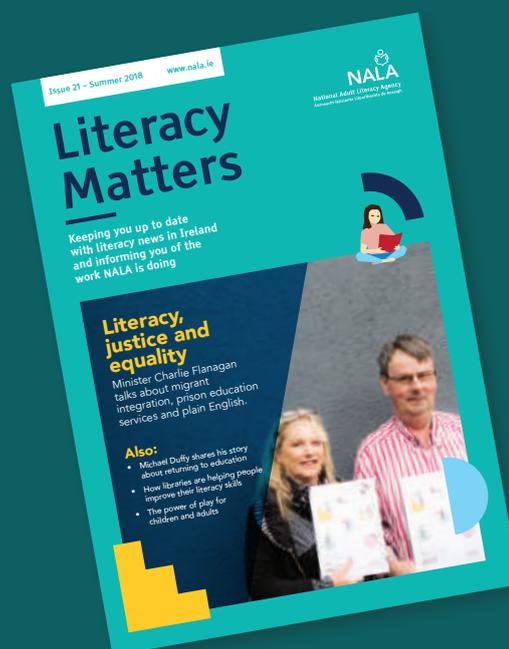
NALA's 2018 annual report is available to read on our website www.nala.ie

Win a €100 book token!

Tell us what you think about Literacy Matters magazine to be in with a chance of winning a €100 National Book Token.

We want to find out what you think about our Literacy Matters magazine. By taking part in our survey you will help us to ensure the magazine continues to feature interesting articles and provide information that readers find useful. Everybody who completes the survey will also have the chance to win a €100 book token. The survey is anonymous and will only take five minutes to do. You can take part now by visiting the following link:

www.surveymonkey.com/r/LiteracyMatters



NALA's Plain English Awards

Dr Inez Bailey, CEO, NALA; Declan Black, Managing Partner, Mason Hayes & Curran; Grace O'Regan, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform; and James Hubbard, National Disability Authority.



And the winners are...

Over 100 people attend a special ceremony to see who won NALA's Plain English Awards.

Forget the Oscars, February was all about the winners of our Plain English Awards.

The winners in the **'Best use of plain English by an organisation'** category, with a joint entry, were the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the National Disability Authority. Their winning entry is a Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service.

The document shows workers in the public service how to produce communications that can be easily understood by members of the public.

"The toolkit is a guide for any public servant who wants to find out how to write and speak clearly. It also shows how to produce clear digital communications. We're absolutely delighted to have won this award because in the public service, it is critical that citizens and customers can understand the information that is available to them. This allows them to access their public services and helps them understand policy information," said Grace O'Regan from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.



In the digital category, the Passport Service won first place for their online passport renewal website. This service can be used by Irish citizens living anywhere in the world and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

“The website is an expansion of the online passport renewal service that allows people to apply for their children’s passport. A lot of people put in a lot of hours to ensure the service is very manageable and accessible so this award means a lot,” said Paul Rowley from the Passport Office.

The category showing the impact of plain English was won by AIB. The entry consists of three letters to customers that AIB wrote in plain English. “The financial services are not the best when it comes to plain English. So we are creating a movement to use the language that customers use. If we don’t, it causes confusion and doesn’t help our brand,” said Mike Gogan from AIB.

The aims of the Plain English Awards are to reward organisations that communicate clearly and to promote the use of plain English in all public information. Fifty organisations submitted over 70 entries that used plain English standards. An independent panel of experts was involved in the judging process. The winners were announced by the well-known Irish Times journalist Conor Pope at an awards ceremony in the Law Society of Ireland.

Speaking about the awards, Dr Inez Bailey, CEO, NALA said: “We developed these awards as we want to create a public preference for organisations that choose to communicate in plain English. Everyone benefits from clear information, written in plain language. Citizens are more likely to understand their rights, organisations are more likely to save money and governments are more likely to make better use of their resources. We would like to congratulate the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the National Disability Authority, the Passport Service and AIB. They have won this award for thinking of the people who use their services and putting them first.”

The Plain English Awards are organised by the National Adult Literacy Agency and sponsored by leading law firm Mason Hayes & Curran.

For a full list of winners please see the next page →

The full list of winners are:

Category winners

Organisation: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the National Disability Authority

Document: Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service - A Universal Design Approach

Category: Best use of plain English by an organisation

Organisation: Passport Service

Entry: Online passport renewal website

Category: Plain English in the digital world

Organisation: AIB

Document: The impact of rewriting three customer letters in plain English

Category: Plain English – the impact

Person: Clare O'Byrne

Entry: Financial letter

Category: Public category - best letter rewritten in plain English

Champions of plain English

A champion of plain English is someone who promotes the use of clear communication and plain language in their organisation. At this year's awards, the following people were recognised as champions of plain English:

- › Liam Ronayne from Cork Library
- › Patricia Carey from the Adoption Authority of Ireland
- › Norma Deasy from the HSE
- › Mike Gogan from AIB
- › The facilitators of the knowledge transfer and exchange workshop at the All Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care.

Other winners on the day, in the category of Best use of plain English by an organisation, were:

- › Pavee Point for their document supporting traveller women before and after pregnancy
- › The Banking and Payments Federation for their guide about managing your banking

Win funding for a literacy or numeracy project

NALA has €6000 available to support projects that will improve the skills of people with literacy and numeracy difficulties. This funding has come from generous donations from Pepsico and also from our partnership with Better World Books.

We would like to share this with our members and we are delighted to invite you to apply for funding to support a suitable literacy or numeracy project.

The funding can be used for new resources or any initiative that supports adult literacy or numeracy. We are especially looking to promote innovative projects that promote digital, health or family literacy or numeracy so get your thinking hats on!

This funding is only open to organisations that are NALA members. Projects will be chosen based on the benefits they will bring for people with literacy and numeracy difficulties. The most you can apply for is €400 and the closing date for applications is Monday 9 September 2019.



Apply now!

To apply for this funding please fill out an online application form by visiting the following link www.bit.ly/literacyfunding2019



Lisa Banks and Thomas Campbell at NALA's Student Day.

Taking the stage

Two learners from NALA's student subcommittee shared their stories at our recent Student Days in Dublin and Limerick.

We were delighted to welcome almost 200 learners to our recent Student Days in Dublin and Limerick. As well as taking part in workshops on plain English and online safety, students also had the opportunity to hear from lots of interesting guest speakers. Two of these, Lisa Banks, a student at Kilkenny and Carlow ETB, and Thomas Campbell, a student from Louth and Meath ETB, shared their inspiring stories of returning to education.

"When I was younger it was normal for people to leave school early to start working. In school I was always just put at the back of the classroom and ignored anyway. And

because I was bullied at school and didn't get any support from teachers I decided that it was easier to just leave," said Lisa.

For years Lisa managed to get by without being able to read or write very well. "I worked with children with special needs and pre-school children and I really loved it. And of course it didn't matter that my spelling or reading wasn't great because when I read stories to them I would just skip the words that I didn't know. At home, my husband did most of our children's homework with them. He would also look after filling in any forms so not many people knew how bad my education

**“Did I ever think I’d
be here speaking
to you like this?
Not in a million years!”**

Thomas Campbell



was. Even when I did a course to qualify as a special needs assistant he was the one who did most of my course work,” she said.

It was only when Lisa and her husband moved their family to Kilkenny that she decided to return to education. She found the experience difficult at first.

“Going back to adult education was a bit up and down for me at the start. It was a friend that asked me to do a course at Word Aid. She said it was a good opportunity to meet new people and make friends as we had just moved to the area,” she said. It wasn’t long before Lisa grew to love going to classes.

“The course was two mornings a week and I learned more and more as time went by. We drank lots of tea and I realised that I enjoyed this whole learning thing! I have since received several certificates at Levels 2, 3 and 4 in a wide range of modules including nutrition and personal and interpersonal skills. I was also one of the first people in Word Aid in Kilkenny to complete a Level 3 course in computer literacy on writeon.ie.”

Lisa said that she is a much more confident person since returning to education. Last year, she jumped at the chance to join NALA’s student subcommittee.

“I was delighted with the opportunity to represent Kilkenny learners and to speak on behalf of all learners’ rights and needs. Going

back to education has done so much for me. It has helped me see what I want to do in the future. I’d love to go to college to become an adult literacy tutor or I’d like to work in a Youthreach centre,” she said.

In his talk at our Student Day, Thomas Campbell also spoke about how going back to education has helped his self-esteem. “Did I ever think I’d be here speaking to you like this? Not in a million years!” he said.

Thomas spoke about how he never got the chance to go to primary school because he had epilepsy. “I was put into an institution until I was 16 years old and when I left it I wasn’t able to read, write or spell. I went to England when I was 32 and when I was over there I got a call from my aunt who told me about a book that helped people to improve their reading and writing. It had 100 words in it and it said that if you could learn those you would be nearly halfway there,” he said.

Like Lisa, Thomas said that he is a different person since going back to education.

“It’s the best thing that ever happened me. It has given me more confidence and enabled me to stand here in front of you today and tell my story,” he said to a huge round of applause.

Going the distance

Cornelius Hickey talks about how classes in his local centre and sessions with NALA's distance learning tutors changed his life.

Cornelius Hickey has one very important message for anyone who is worried about returning to education.

"Don't be afraid. Fear destroyed me but I learned that if you can overcome it then there are people out there that can help you," he says.

Cornelius, who attends literacy classes in Tipperary ETB and also uses NALA's Distance Learning Service (DLS), says that when he was younger, education wasn't as important as physical work.

"I grew up in the seventies and back then your education came second to working on the farm. There were no interventions or recognition of my learning difficulties," he says.

Like many adults, part of the reason Cornelius wanted to return to education was to help his children and to give them a good example.

"When my sons were young, I volunteered as a GAA coach. While I was very good on the sporting side of things, I was often put on the spot to read and write names. I wanted to ensure they did not lose out on a good education as I had. I can now say that I am very proud of them. They both achieved good

Leaving Certs, are in their final year of college and have promising careers ahead," he says.

When he first returned to education, Cornelius didn't go to his local education centre.

"I started with one-to-one tutoring in a centre fifteen miles away from where I lived because I didn't want to meet anyone that knew me," he says.

But as everyone knows, Ireland is a small place. "One day I did meet someone there that I knew and I was very upset. But these days, that would not bother me at all," he says.

Cornelius' confidence started to grow after he had been doing the one-to-one classes for a while. "I then moved to a group class in my local centre. Joining the group was hard but slowly I developed self-belief and self-confidence. There was a certain level of trust among the class participants and friendships were formed," he says.

In addition to attending the education centre, Cornelius started doing classes using NALA's DLS in 2000. For a year one of NALA's DLS tutors used to help him over the phone. As his sons were both young at that time, he had to put that on hold for a while. But he found it so

Cornelius Hickey,
a student from
Tipperary ETB.



**"Fear destroyed me
but I learned that
you can overcome it."**

Cornelius Hickey

helpful that he decided to go back to it a few years ago.

"I contacted NALA's DLS again in April 2017 as I had more free time and I really felt the DLS sessions would support my Friday classes in the Nenagh Adult Learning Centre. Doing the classes has really helped me and I now find reading and writing relaxing and an escape from work. Also, I am not able to do as much physical work as I used to do in the past, so I have more time to spend learning," he says.

Working with a DLS tutor has really complemented the learning that Cornelius is doing in the education centre.

"Last December I completed a Level 2 Award. I was so delighted and proud of myself and my achievement. I am now working on a Level 3 module."

Cornelius also wants people to know that, as well as improving his skills reading and writing, there are other benefits to returning to education.

"Over the last three years, I have made a lot of good friendships in the class and it is like a social event to me," he says.

It's been a long journey for Cornelius and he is very grateful to all of the people who helped him along the way.

"I would to thank all the people that helped me including the tutors in the Nenagh Adult Learning Centre, NALA's DLS tutors and most especially my wife and sons. I really hope that by sharing my story I will help someone."

Distance Learning Service

Please email Joan Butler
jbutler@nala.ie to find out
more about NALA's Distance
Learning Service.

Stop. Think. Check.

In a world of fake news, a new campaign shows you how to Be Media Smart.

Every day we have to make choices. We choose what we want to eat, what we want to wear, what we want to listen to and who we want to represent us in public office. But to make good choices, we need reliable information. And although there seems to be information everywhere these days, it can be difficult to judge how accurate or reliable that information is. Some false information (known as disinformation) is designed to mislead people with the aim of influencing them or shaping public opinion. Other false information includes genuine mistakes, satire, parody, or information that is clearly representing one side of a story or a personal opinion.

To help people distinguish reliable information from unreliable information, Media Literacy Ireland has provided a set of very useful tips as part of their Be Media Smart campaign.

So if you're unsure about some information you should always try to **stop, think** and **check** that what you are seeing, reading or hearing is accurate and reliable.

Stop

Read more than the headline

Headlines are designed to catch your eye, but a headline can't give the full story and neither can a short social media post. If it sounds unbelievable, it probably is.

Don't assume that a picture or photo is giving you the whole story

Sometimes pictures lie. If a picture has been altered or photoshopped, or simply used out of context, then it can be easy to draw the wrong conclusions.

Just because information is viral doesn't mean it's accurate

Disinformation can be designed to provoke a strong emotional reaction and prompt instant sharing or 'liking' in a moment of outrage, excitement or disbelief. Social media and messaging applications make it really easy to share information quickly to wide groups of people.



Think

Think carefully about what the information is for

This means that you need to ask yourself if the information you see or hear is intended to tell you something, entertain you or persuade you.

Consider your own biases

Ask yourself whether the information challenges you or matches your own views. We are more likely to believe information that supports our own views – even if it seems a bit dubious. Algorithms can track what you read, see and hear online and generate recommendations for you based on your previous choices. So the information that you get can be highly personalised and not necessarily reflect broader views or opinions.

See if the information is being reported anywhere else

If you can't find the same information elsewhere, it could be because it is inaccurate, unreliable or out of date. This is especially true if the information appears to be very topical or newsworthy.

Check

Look at the web address

Sometimes disinformation is found on websites with a web address (URL) that looks very similar to a well-known news or media site. There might only be a small change in the spelling of the URL. If in doubt, go to the real site and compare the URLs.

Find out who the creator is

Knowing who created the information will help you judge what their motivation is. Are they trying to sell something, a product, an idea or something else?

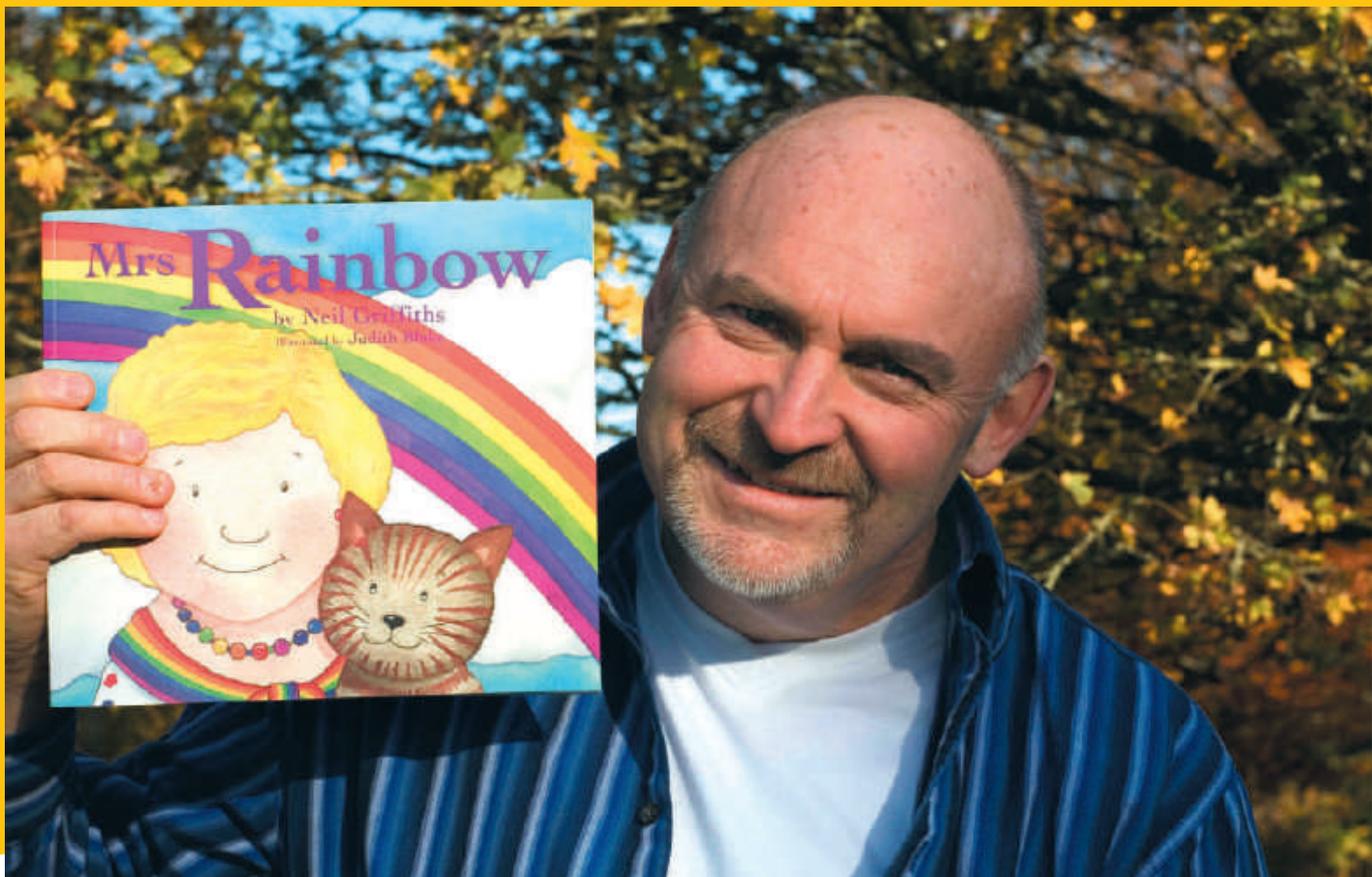
Look at the detail

Do any dates mentioned make sense? Are there references to unnamed experts? Are the links to the author's sources clearly visible? Information that comes from reliable and trustworthy sources is usually well written. So watch out for typos and strange sounding sentences.

Ask the experts

Get a second opinion. If you have doubts about a piece of information, you can use a free fact-checking service to help decide how reliable the information is. For a list of fact-checking sites across the world go www.reporterslab.org/fact-checking

For our more tips visit bemediasmart.ie



Release your inner performer

Speaking at our Tutors Forum, Story Sacks creator Neil Griffiths gave some tips to develop children's love of reading.

Neil Griffiths has a one word answer whenever anybody asks him how they can get children interested in books and stories.

"Performance. That's really what it all comes down to. The most effective way to engage children in books and stories is by being a fantastic performer. When adults are reading to children they have to do absolutely everything in their power to bring the story to life. Adults need to do more than simply read, they need to use every gesture, every facial expression, every funny voice they can possibly think of in order to create a world that children will want to come back to again and again," he said.

Neil also highlighted the link between talking to children and reading to them.

"If you can't talk to them you won't be able to read to them. By talking to them you are already giving them the tools for reading. Talk as you walk, talk as you do things, talk as you cook. Fill your children with vocabulary and language that they will use later. When you do this you will also be developing their curiosity about language and their imagination at the same time," he said.

Neil is famous for creating Story Sacks. A story sack is a large cloth bag containing a storybook



“Every single one of us can be a great performer.”

Neil Griffiths

with supporting materials, such as puppets, soft toys of the main characters and a game to stimulate reading and language skills. There is usually an audio tape of the story so children can follow along as they read or act out parts of the story. Neil came up with the idea in 1995 after hearing that only 16% of children in the UK were being read a bedtime story. Today, he is still concerned that not enough children are growing up with a love of reading and he highlighted four main reasons for this.

“The first one is technology. Technology is great for so many things but unfortunately it’s also responsible for distracting people, both adults and children, from reading. The second reason is that parents are not giving enough time to reading to children. I always ask parents to try to give at least 15-20 minutes a day reading and enjoying a book with their children. Now I know it’s tough and that sometimes people’s situations can be very difficult but you have to prioritise your children and their imaginations,” he said.

“The pressure to learn is also another reason we are losing our readers. Some adults read to children because they want them to learn something but instead the focus should be on fun. If the joy is taken out of reading then why would children want to do it?”

“The fourth reason we are losing our readers is that not enough children are being read to by fantastic performers. The minute you have

children or work with them then you have signed up to being a performer for the rest of your life. But I have great news! Every single one of us can be a great performer, no matter where we come from or what our background is.”

Neil’s top tips to help your reading performance

- › Read through the story first and plan key moments for you and the children.
- › Have a think about questions you can ask the child about the story.
- › Do not begin the story straight away. Instead, give it a red carpet build up and tempt the child into the story.
- › Use your voice. Read the story aloud to yourself beforehand. Change your tone to build up suspense and create excitement. And don’t forget to be theatrical!
- › Use your body to the full. Move about to express mood and use arm gestures. Act out the scenes as you read the story.
- › Your face says it all so try to exaggerate your normal expressions.

For more tips about reading to children, and other activities you can do with them, please visit helpmykidlearn.ie

A 21st century workplace

Sylvia Caldwell from Keelings talks about the importance of literacy, numeracy and technology skills in today's workplace.

A recent OECD report on adult education and training found that the nature of work is changing. Globalisation and technology mean that people need a wider range of skills than ever before in order to succeed in today's workplace. And because the pace of change is so fast, it can be difficult for someone with literacy, numeracy or technology difficulties to adapt.

Sylvia Caldwell is the Learning and Development Manager at Keelings, an Irish business that grows and distributes fresh fruit to the retail sector. She says that there are several things a company can do to help staff improve their skills.

"Firstly, it's important to always be aware that people could have literacy, numeracy or technology needs. You should also remember that these needs could change if the staff member changes roles. For example, when people join Keelings as general operatives working on our production line, the first part of their on-the-job training, following induction, is learning how to log onto the weighing scales to set weights for different fruit. This means that some basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills are required at the outset and these demands then grow if staff progress into more skilled roles," says Sylvia.

"Also, some of our general operatives are not originally from Ireland and they have different types of skills and education levels. In many cases, staff may be literate in their own language, but they could have very low levels of literacy in English. To deal with this, we have made our processes as visual as possible, with pictures that show people how to do things," she says.

With her background in adult education, Sylvia is very aware of the challenges people with literacy, numeracy and technology needs face in today's workplace.

"I trained as a literacy tutor in 1998 and went on to spend 12 years working as a tutor in Dublin Adult Learners Centre. I always knew that I wanted to work in education but outside the traditional education system. I loved second-chance-education because I was inspired every day by the stories of the people I tutored. I admired their courage and willingness to step outside their comfort zone and I found the work very rewarding," she says.



“Digital literacy skills are extremely important in the modern workplace.”

Sylvia Caldwell

Sylvia took a career break in 2010 when her son started school. She started delivering communications training to public and private sector organisations. This led to her doing a Masters in Personal and Management Coaching. She joined Keelings in 2016 and she enjoys contributing to an environment that helps staff to develop and improve their skills.

Sylvia also recognises that upskilling and personal development opportunities are more important for workers than ever before.

“We plan to run a personal development and interview skills programme to help new starters visualise their career path with us and to help them be ready for new opportunities when they arise,” she says.

“We know that a lack of confidence doing interviews puts many of our staff off applying for new roles. This is the case for well qualified staff who don’t have good levels of English and also for staff who have low levels of qualifications. We’d like to support people to overcome this barrier and see how they can grow their skills.”

Digital literacy

The impact of technology has brought about many opportunities for almost every workplace. This means that staff now need to have digital literacy skills that were unheard of even a decade ago.

“Digital literacy skills are extremely important in the modern workplace. Even our new rostering system will be done using a smartphone app so people need to have a certain level of comfort with using technology. With smartphones being everywhere now, it means that most already have some degree of digital literacy skills which benefits us. For example, staff who are used to using smartphones will more easily be able to transition to using tablets on our production line,” she says.

Literacy in the workplace

Skills for Work is a government-funded programme to help employees improve the basic skills needed in the workplace. To find out more visit www.skillsforwork.ie or email Helen Ryan hryan@nala.ie

Please read and enjoy this article

A redesigned hospital waiting list letter combines plain English and behavioural science techniques.

Looking after our health is something we can all put on the long finger. Sometimes we need a bit of a push to take care of ourselves. Our family and friends can give us this push, but it can also come from good communication from our healthcare providers. A newly redesigned version of the letter sent to patients on hospital waiting lists is a perfect example of this type of good communication.

Hospitals send letters to patients on a waiting list to check if they still require a procedure or if they wish to be removed from the waiting list. Typically, only about one in four patients reply to their waiting list letters while 15% do not attend their outpatient appointments. In order to address this issue, the Department of Health has created a new letter to validate waiting lists which combines plain English techniques with behavioural science principles. Work is also underway to redesign appointment letters.

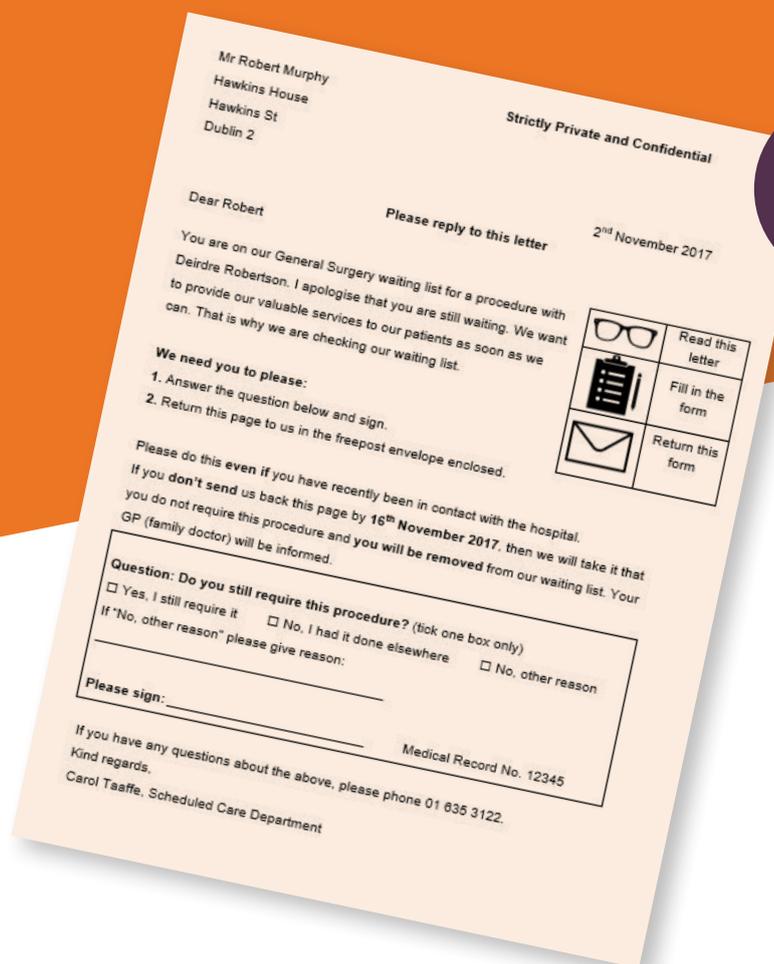
Plain English is a way to write and present information so a reader can understand and act on it after a single reading. Behavioural science on the other hand looks at your mind as having two systems.

System A is instinctual and emotional and responds quickly without conscious thought. You don't have to use too much of your mental energy. Consider your reaction when watching a scary movie or seeing the price of a pint in Temple Bar. You don't jump because you have to think that you're scared or outraged. You do it instinctively.

System B, on the other hand, is for all those complicated activities that require us to make an effort. For example, try to multiply 17 by 24. Go on, take a minute. You can feel your brain working out, can't you?

For years, behavioural scientists have been influencing us to make decisions in the private and public world. For example; think of those yellow markings you see when you cross the street: 'Look left'. You know this, but it's still nice to get the friendly nudge.

By combining plain English and behavioural science, the new letter gives people this friendly nudge in language they can understand.



The redesigned waiting list letter.

How does it do this?

- ▶ The language used in the new letter is simple and doesn't contain any jargon or unnecessary words;
- ▶ There is a clear call to action, in this case 'Please reply to this letter', at the top so the reader immediately knows what is expected of them; and
- ▶ The letter is also more personal than before. The reader's first name is used, for example 'Dear Robert', and the reader is also given the name of the person they should reply to.

These are just some of the techniques used to encourage the reader to reply to the letter. In behavioural science terms, they appeal to the reader's instinctual system A.

To test the effectiveness of the new letter, the researchers conducted a test in eight hospitals across the country. In each hospital one group of patients on the waiting list were sent the original letter and another group was sent the redesigned letter. The response rate was almost 20% greater among patients who received the new letter.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) has chosen the new letter as the national template for waiting list letters, so you can expect to see more of it.

"Patients are now much clearer about what they are being asked and what the action is that they need to carry out," said Alison Green, Director of Process Innovation at the NTPF.

Robert Murphy, the research officer in the Department of Health who led the project, said that its success is down to the collaboration between several organisations.

"During this project the Department of Health worked closely with the NTPF, the Health Service Executive, University College Dublin, the Economic and Social Research Institute, the London School of Economics and NUI Galway. NALA's input into the redesign of the letter was also invaluable and helped to ensure that we achieved the best result possible," he said.

PS 17x24 is 408 by the way. But you worked it out, didn't you?



Roisin Doherty from the Active Inclusion Unit at SOLAS, Andrew Brownlee, Executive Director of Strategy and Knowledge, SOLAS; Dr Inez Bailey, CEO, NALA; Mary Flanagan and Triona Lynch from Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board.

Putting parents in the picture

A recent international conference in Ennis looked at the importance of family learning.

"If you asked me 10 years ago if I'd be able to get up and talk in a room full of people, I would have burst out crying. I didn't have the confidence and I didn't think I was worthy enough. But standing up here today I'm a different woman and that's all down to family learning. It was great to realise that I wasn't the only person having problems learning. It was great to find out that the support and help was there for me."

These words by adult learner Margaret Donovan show just how deeply family learning can change someone's life. Margaret was speaking at a recent two day

international conference on family learning that was held in Ennis organised by Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board. The conference looked at how adult education providers can use family learning programmes to make a difference to parents' lives.

Family learning involves inviting parents, grandparents or carers to attend group classes on how to support, encourage and inspire their children as they learn. Parents attend classes and programmes to help their children and, in doing so, also learn for themselves. This focus on child and family strengthens and maximises learning within

“Parents who are interested in their child’s learning make a positive impact on the child’s achievement at school.”

Mary Flanagan

the home. Very often these classes are also parents’ first step back into education since they left school. As parents become familiar with the learning centre and staff they feel more confident in returning to education and committing to further classes.

“The purpose of family learning is to create a positive enjoyable experience for all of those involved, so that they may use that as the first step towards a desire to learn more,” said George O’Callaghan, Chief Executive, Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board.

“Family learning is a journey. Parents are helped to plot a route from the informal to the more formal aspects of education. They could also progress to higher forms of education or the world of employment,” he said.

Mary Flanagan, an Adult Literacy Organiser with Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, helped organise the event.

“Research shows that parents who are interested in their child’s learning make a positive impact on the child’s achievement at school. Parents don’t have to know everything; we are all learning every day. We must never forget how much parents already teach their children in a very natural way. We build on this in family learning work and show how the home is such a valuable learning place,” Mary said.

The conference also featured a preview of the forthcoming Guidelines for Family Literacy

Practice in Education and Training Boards. These guidelines will help to progress family learning programmes delivered across Ireland through the further education and training sector.

Andrew Brownlee, Executive Director of Strategy and Knowledge, SOLAS, said the guidelines will help the development of family learning programmes across Ireland.

“Family literacy is a hugely important area that we in the further education and training sector are focused on,” said Andrew Brownlee, Executive Director of Strategy and Knowledge, SOLAS.

“This is part of a wider strategic approach by SOLAS and our partners across further education and training to supporting good practice. Other guidelines are being developed in areas like initial assessment of literacy and numeracy, universal design for learning, approaches to English as a second language (ESOL) and numeracy teaching.”

To find out more about the conference please email Mary Flanagan mary.flanagan@lcteb.ie

The write time

Creative writing groups are a great way for adult learners to develop their storytelling and reading skills.

It's often said that everyone has a book in them. This may or may not be true but everyone certainly has a story in them. This idea is what inspired literacy tutors Eleanor Neff and Paula Tiller to use creative writing to bring about transformative change in adult learners in Kerry ETB. Transformative change means that learners will begin to challenge their own assumptions and explore alternative ways of seeing the world and themselves.

Speaking at NALA's Tutors Forum in January, Eleanor and Paula spoke about how their creative writing classes are based on the Amherst Writers and Artists book. The Amherst philosophy is simple: every person is a writer, and every writer deserves a safe environment in which to experiment, learn, and develop craft.

"The Amherst method has been used with experienced writers, people with writer's block and also with people who are just beginning to write. There's a great chapter on working with people who have not previously had a voice or whose voice has been silenced through poverty, or other life barriers. The Amherst method is all about the power of language and the power of building confidence which is something tutors do

every day in our work," said Eleanor.

The Amherst method is useful because it provides some essential guidelines that tutors can use to protect the learners taking part in a creative writing group.

"The first one is that there should be a non-hierarchical spirit in the group. This is very important as it helps people feel like the group is a safe place. There should also be confidentiality about what is written and what is discussed in the writing group. This helps to build trust among the group," she said.

"The Amherst method also encourages people to treat each other's work as fiction. Even if someone is writing something that seems like it is coming from a personal experience then the other people in the group should still presume it is fiction."

How people in the group speak about each other's work is also important.

"When we are discussing things and talking about someone's writing we avoid referring to the writer and instead refer to the narrator or character. For example, instead of asking the writer why they have a red car in the story, we would ask why does their character or



Literacy tutors Eleanor Neff and Paula Tiller from Kerry ETB at our Tutors Forum.

“It’s amazing how quickly learners will want to share their writing with the group.”

Paula Tiller

narrator have a red car in the story. This helps to remove the personal element from it and it creates a safe space for people to share.”

When they started using the Amherst method, Eleanor and Paula found that learners who were initially reluctant quickly became enthusiastic about sharing their work.

“There’s no pressure on anyone to share. But it’s amazing how quickly learners who came in to the class with their heads down will soon want to share their work with the whole group,” said Paula.

Of course, creative writing groups aren’t just about writing. Learners also end up becoming better readers.

“The reading is very important because it helps with the craft of writing. When we first work with a group of learners we get an idea of the kind of genres they are interested in. And not only do people have different tastes in books but people also like different films and TV shows. All of these interests will influence the kind of stories people write,” said Paula.

Learners taking part in creative writing classes soon start to see the benefits.

“It really helps people’s confidence. They go from being nervous about their stories to wanting to read them out to the whole group. They also want to hear other people’s stories and offer advice and feedback on them. Very often, people are also inspired to keep a journal about things that happen because it helps them get ideas for new stories. So not only are people writing in class they are starting to write outside of class. People have also told us that as a result of the creative writing project they are now changing the way they think about things. They question things more now and the classes have helped them see the world in a different way.”

To watch a video from our Tutors Forum featuring Eleanor and Paula please visit our YouTube channel www.youtube.com/nalairland



Tony Daly from 80:20 giving his workshop at our critical literacy seminar.

Teaching between the lines

A recent seminar, organised by NALA and AONTAS, looked at how tutors can help learners develop their critical literacy skills.

Critical thinking and critical literacy skills are important in the classroom because they are important outside the classroom. This was emphasised by Joe McHugh, the Minister for Education and Skills, at the recent launch of his new Action Plan for Education.

“The Action Plan for Education is underpinned by a drive to prepare people in a balanced way for life and work. It emphasises the need for young people and students to aim high and to fulfil their potential while developing the skills to think critically and to adapt and innovate with resilience and wellbeing,” he said.

The ability to think critically is also something that is very important for adult learners. Being able to critically analyse media texts, such as books, newspapers and even online information, helps people become active and engaged citizens. This media text can include videos and audio too, so it is not just the written word.

“A lot of learners feel the texts used in the classroom don’t speak to them. Learners don’t see themselves in the texts and this makes them feel invisible,” said tutor Pauline Hensey at the critical literacy seminar organised by NALA and AONTAS.

“Critical literacy has political implications because it affects how people participate in society.”

Utah Papen



“But this means there is a great opportunity for tutors to bring critical literacy into the classroom by connecting the texts they use to the lives of learners. This helps learners to talk and think about how the texts reflect their lives and their experiences,” she said.

“One of the most empowering things that we can do for learners is to help them produce texts using their own stories and experiences. When people start writing their own stories it encourages them to start thinking and questioning things that they might not have given too much attention to before. If that can happen then learners find it easier to start looking critically at other people’s texts,” she said.

Pauline also spoke about the importance of curiosity in the classroom. “Ask students questions about a text in order to spike their curiosity. Ask them about the author - Who are they? Where do they come from?, Do you trust what they are saying? Why? Asking these questions will get learners thinking about texts in a more active and engaged way,” she said.

“Also ask them about who is absent from the text or whose voice is not being heard. I showed some learners a film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* and one woman, who works as a cleaner, said she noticed that the servants in the film were always silent. They weren’t absent, but they didn’t have a voice. We all looked at the film differently after that. This is a perfect example of how critical thinking can help change your perspective about something.”

Utah Papen, Professor of Literacy Studies at Lancaster University in England, spoke about how critical literacy skills can help people to deal with political information.

“Critical literacy is much more than reading and writing, it also has political implications because it affects how people participate in society. For example, if people in the UK had greater critical literacy skills they would have been in a better position to analyse media coverage about Brexit. They would have been able to look at the language used in newspaper articles or social media posts and decide if it was accurate or if it was just being sensational in order to grab their attention,” she said.

The role of social media in the adult literacy classroom was also something that was explored by Tony Daly from 80:20, an organisation that promotes education on human development and human rights.

“Tutors can help their learners become digital citizens. The first thing they can do is show them how to use social media, so they can tweet and write Facebook posts. The next step is to show learners how to think critically about what they see on social media and encourage them to question where the content comes from and what its purpose is.”

For more tips from our critical literacy seminar please visit NALA’s YouTube channel www.youtube.com/nalairland

Get involved in Literacy Awareness Week 2019



This year's National Adult Literacy Awareness Week (NALAW) will kick off in September with a special conference celebrating International Literacy Day. It will run in tandem with NALA's 'Take the first step' campaign and will raise awareness of the free services available nationwide.

As part of the campaign, NALA works with ETBs to produce promotional videos of students telling their story about returning to education. These videos have proved very effective in encouraging members of the public to take the first step and return to education to improve their literacy, numeracy, maths or digital skills.

How you can get involved

This year, NALA would like to produce videos, or other materials, **promoting ETB services available in your area**. The videos will feature contact details of the local ETB and NALA would like your help in finding students who have a good story to tell and would be willing to take part. If you know any students that would potentially like to be involved please contact Patrick Gleeson, NALA Communications Officer on 01 412 7916 or pgleeson@nala.ie

Would you like free awareness posters?

As part of our awareness campaign, every year we design and print posters for adult literacy services. We make sure that each poster has a contact number for the local service and includes the relevant ETB logo. These posters are **free** but the closing date for orders is **17 June 2019**. To order posters please email Patrick Gleeson pgleeson@nala.ie with the phone number and ETB logo you would like to advertise.

Other news

NALA joins forces with RTÉ

A new media partnership between NALA and RTÉ saw NALA's 'Take the first step' campaign promoted across RTÉ TV, radio, online and social media earlier this year. The campaign uses real-life stories of students to encourage people who have difficulty with reading, writing, maths or technology to get the help they need. Each person's story focuses on the benefits of returning to education with the aim of encouraging others to reap the rewards by doing the same.

Literacy students mark World Book Day

To celebrate World Book Day in March, Kevin O'Duffy, from Laois and Offaly ETB, was interviewed in the Offaly Independent. Michael Duffy, from Cavan and Monaghan ETB, was interviewed in The Sun and The Mirror. Michael also appeared on RTE 1's Today show alongside Nuala Glanton from Cork ETB.



New staff members

We are delighted to welcome three new people to the NALA team.



Elaine Cohalan is our new Innovation Manager. Elaine has 13 years' experience working in further education in both the public and private sector in Ireland and she has worked on several education technology projects. Before joining NALA, Elaine ran her own company in the food and tourism sector for which she was awarded the Women Mean Business Newcomer Entrepreneur Award.



Ann Hegarty is our new Training Co-ordinator. Ann has been involved in adult literacy as a practitioner and researcher for over 30 years. During her career she has worked in women's education, integrating literacy, workplace literacy, distance learning and family literacy.



Sean Driver is our new Plain English Editor. Sean has worked as an English teacher for over six years in Dublin. He has a degree in English Studies and a Masters in Digital Humanities from Trinity College Dublin.

Dates for the diary

International Literacy Day and Awareness Week

This year's National Adult Literacy Awareness Week (NALAW) will kick off in September with a special conference celebrating International Literacy Day. It will run in tandem with NALA's 'Take the first step' campaign and will raise awareness of the free services available nationwide.

To find out how you can get involved to help us raise awareness about adult literacy please see page 30 or email Patrick Gleeson pgleeson@nala.ie

Maths Week

In October, NALA and the Education and Training Boards will host a series of half-day numeracy workshops at different locations around the country.

For more details please email Fergus Dolan fdolan@nala.ie

Family Learning Conference

Thursday 28 November

Venue: The Ashling Hotel, Parkgate Street, Dublin 8

This conference will bring together a range of experts to look at the role of family learning in adult education. A series of workshops will also be available for people to take part in during the day. For more information please email Fergus Dolan fdolan@nala.ie

Plain English Training

Plain English is a style of writing and layout that the intended reader can understand after a single reading. It will help you clarify what you're trying to say and, as a result, help your reader get your message exactly as you intended. Presenting information in plain English includes using suitable words, adopting a direct style, avoiding unnecessary jargon and designing your written information to make it easier to follow.

We will hold plain English training on:

- › Wednesday 12 June
- › Wednesday 18 September
- › Wednesday 16 October

To register visit nala.ie/events



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European Union
Investing in Your Future
European Social Fund



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National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh