

Sensory Trust information sheet

Accessible information - Widgit symbols

Symbols are widely used on road signs, in airports and stations, in shopping centres and at visitor attractions. They help to communicate ideas quickly and simply, helping people visualise and remember what they have read.

This principle has been developed into comprehensive symbol languages, providing much greater support than basic directional and safety icons. These symbol languages give people with learning disabilities in particular the opportunity to understand and experience the world in a way that meets their needs.

What is Widgit?

Widgits are a pictorial language of symbols used predominantly for people with learning disabilities. The symbols have developed over the past 20 years and they are used in many countries worldwide in 15 languages (overseas symbol users can recognise the Widgit symbols used in the UK).

There are over 7000 images in both colour and black and white covering a vocabulary of over 20,000 words. This vocabulary is continually being extended and gives access to a wide range of topics and curricular areas.

The symbols are clear, concise and suitable for all ages. They have been carefully designed to illustrate a single concept without adding unnecessary information such as gender. They all share a common structure allowing users to develop their own vocabulary.

How to use Widgits

It is important to understand how symbols work before you include them in your information material or on your signs. As with all languages it is not a question of direct, literal translation. Imagine what your

information would look and read like if you tried to translate it into French using just a dictionary. For single words such as toilet, exit, café, 10mins, a direct translation is appropriate, however for longer sentences and for communicating complicated and abstract concepts more experience is required and you are probably best off calling in an expert (www.widgit.com).

For longer text such as interpretation signs Widgits can be used supported (with text underneath the symbols) or unsupported (no text). Often the contents of an interpretation sign are best reduced down to a sentence of symbols that communicate the key theme.

Widgits in every-day materials

Symbols have been used to support reading and writing in special schools since the mid '80s and have been used extensively since the recommendations by the National Curriculum Council Guidance in the late 1990s. As students leave these schools however they find that symbols are no longer an integral part of daily life.

Including symbols and making simplified symbol supported information includes these users in the environment, and gives positive messages to everybody that this group are an important part of society.





In brief

- 1 Using symbols helps everyone, but in particular people with learning disabilities, understand information
- 2 A symbol can simply illustrate a word, but it can do much more than that. It is a graphic representation of a concept
- 3 Symbols used in public spaces also benefit a wide range of other people, including young children, foreign visitors and adults with poor literacy skills

Widgits at Eden Project

Eden has been an active partner in the development of accessible information using Widgits. Using symbols demonstrates their commitment to inclusion and provides a welcoming and engaging environment for people with learning disabilities, their friends and families as well as for people with low literacy and overseas visitors. Positive feedback has shown how excited visitors were to find the same symbols as the ones they used in their centre or school. Several people have actually visited after hearing that Widgits were being used.

Widgits at Sensory Trust

Sensory Trust has been involved in the use of Widgits for signage, interpretation and information at the Eden Project and at National Trust properties. We have run training sessions with Eden design staff to enable them to develop their own resources for exhibits, signs and education.

Widgits are very useful when carrying out consultation and community engagement work. By using Widgits in our work we enable people with learning difficulties to communicate their experiences and feelings directly without having to rely on a carer or family member to speak on their behalf.



Sensory Trust

The Sensory Trust promotes and supports the creation and management of outdoor spaces that can be used and enjoyed by everyone, regardless of age or ability.

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