

## Illiterate individuals are here among us!

Today, on the way to work, at the grocery store or when you went to pick up your kids from school, you may have crossed paths with someone who is illiterate. You may even have exchanged a few words with them without being aware of their difficulties. Or they may be someone close to you: your spouse, father, sister or friend.

To find out whether you know someone who is illiterate or has difficulty reading, read the statements below and place a check against situations you have encountered. If you have checked several of these situations, you have likely been in the presence of an illiterate person.

### I have come across someone who:

- Chooses to read a document or fill out a form at home, using the excuse that he does not have his glasses or has a sore arm or hand.
- Mispronounces words with more than three syllables, or with more complex sounds.
- Has a limited vocabulary and has trouble expressing a simple idea clearly or putting more abstract concepts into words.
- Tries to memorize information I give him rather than writing it down or asks me to write it down for him because his handwriting is not very good.
- Presents me with a handwritten bill or work estimate containing several spelling errors.
- At work, refuses to accept a new position or a promotion because she is not interested in it.
- Misses an appointment, even though I wrote to him confirming the meeting.

**How should you react? What should you do?**

### Illiterate individuals

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Illiteracy has many faces: young dropouts, forest industry workers, young single mothers, female immigrant textile workers, men, women, living in the city or in the

regions, young people or pensioners can all be illiterate. It is wrong to think that illiterate individuals live far away from us. On the contrary, they are close by, here among us, but are ashamed to reveal their difficulties.

### **You should know that an illiterate individual:**

- Rarely admits to having trouble reading and writing. He is ashamed of this condition, and thinks he is the only one in this situation.
- Generally has low self-esteem, and feels very vulnerable when faced with anyone she sees as more “educated” than she is. She can exhibit submissiveness or become aggressive in a situation she does not fully understand.
- Has learned to use a broad range of tricks to hide his difficulties.
- Often has trouble pronouncing words because she lacks the knowledge to make out the syllables forming them, so she will often say them as she hears them.
- Often lacks the vocabulary he needs to express his thoughts clearly.
- Often has difficulty with perception of time and space.

### **If you believe the person in front of you may be illiterate, here are some attitudes you can adopt:**

- Use simple vocabulary and short sentences; rephrase your idea if you sense it has not been fully understood. But do not talk to the person as if they were a child. Create a climate of confidence and trust.
- Simplify the more technical vocabulary specific to a company or government department, and avoid the numerous abbreviations which often mean nothing to the person you are talking to.
- If the person in front of you wants to read the document you are giving him somewhere else or later, give a short, clear summary of the content, providing the main information.
- Take the initiative of writing down legibly the important information you want to convey.
- De-dramatize the situation by confiding that you often meet people who have difficulty reading and writing and that you can “give them a hand.”
- Make sure the date of an upcoming meeting or an event to which you are inviting the person is clearly understood and, when necessary, provide reference points, such as “in two weekends’ time” or “the week after Christmas” or “right after school vacation starts,” and so on.

- Avoid sending a reminder by mail to confirm an appointment. Instead, use the telephone.
- If you come across the same person more regularly, let him know that he can improve his condition and that several thousand people in his situation have gone back to school for adults. Give him the number for the St. Joseph County Literacy Council and let him know that we are ready to help.