

The publishing of easy-to-read in Sweden

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1. Introduction

It is indeed pleasing that the publication of easy-to-read literature is beginning to grow in different parts of the world, and it will be exciting to follow the work taking shape here in Australia.

I would like to talk about our experience in Sweden — both positive and not-so-positive — and I hope that some of this can be useful in your work here.

1.1 The publication of easy-to-read in Sweden

The aim of our efforts in Sweden is to make literature and news accessible for, above all, adult people with reading difficulties or limited literacy and language skills.

Publication of easy-to-read literature has a rather long tradition in Sweden. Easy-to-read books have been published since 1968 — we are now celebrating the 25th anniversary of the easy-to-read book in Sweden — and some 330 titles have been published to this date. For the last nine years, an easy-to-read newspaper called 8 SIDOR (or 8 PAGES) has been published.

The LL Foundation (The Easy-to-Read Foundation), which I represent, has since 1987 been responsible for the easy-to-read publishing. The activities of the Foundation are based on directives from the Swedish Government and Parliament.

Developments have led to us taking responsibility for a variety of elements in the easy-to-read field, and today the LL Foundation includes a book publishing house and editorial office, newspaper publishing and a marketing department handling among other things a mail order book sales and a publication of a newsletter, promoting the mail order system. We have also begun providing some consulting services on preparation of easy-to-read material.

I'd like to spend the next 30 minutes or so like this:

I'll talk for a few minutes about the need for easy-to-read material, then go into Swedish experience in working with literature; the editorial process of making a text easy to understand, and the question of whether it's possible to unify the needs of different groups. I'd also like to take the chance to say a few words about the need for easy-to-read news and information about society in general. Finally, I'll take up marketing and the economics of easy-to-read publishing.

1.2 What is easy to read?

First, we need to clarify a concept. What is easy-to-read? When we speak of **easy-to-read**, what we really mean is **easy-to-understand**. It's not just a matter of de-coding the words. Reading should also lead to acquiring some information, and above all, to an experience that sets thoughts in motion and stimulates fantasy.

1.3 Is there a need for easy-to-read ?

Yes. I'd even go so far as to say it is a democratic right that everyone should have access to culture, literature and information — and in a comprehensible form.

Being able to read independently means a tremendous amount for self-confidence, giving people the possibility of expanding their view of the world, to develop and steer their own lives.

2. Easy-to-read literature

2.1 Are easy-to-read books “real” literature?

Perhaps some people don't think so. They may see easy-to-read products as being watered down. They might feel that it's not such a good idea to get people used to simplified texts instead of encouraging them to learn to read “real” books, and so become integrated into society.

But some people have **handicaps** that make it impossible, without special efforts, to experience literature. Without easy-to-read books, they would be excluded from a large part of our common cultural heritage.

For others, those who are **unused** to reading, easy-to-read literature can be a door-opener. Easy-to-read literature can awaken interest, give self-confidence, and provide an opportunity to improve reading skills.

And I would claim that easy-to-read books can be a very good way to gain literary experience, joy and excitement. Easy-to-read books should at least aim to unify requirements for simplicity and comprehensibility with literary interpretation and artistic quality.

I would like to see easy-to-read publishing as something of a genre of its own, to be judged for its own merits.

2.2 Who can find pleasure in easy-to-read? Which are the target groups?

In Sweden, we estimate that between 300,000 and 500,000 people can benefit from easy-to-read, people who have a difficult time reading and understanding ordinary papers and books. This is between 4 and 6 percent of the population. And there are people with some kind of reading handicap as well as people with limited reading ability,

by other reasons.

Among target groups, we include:

- the intellectually, or mentally, disabled (who have hard to learn and difficulties in understanding)
- aphasiacs (stroke victims who have lost their language)
- The born deafs (who have the sign-language as their first language and therefore limited reading ability)
- dyslexics (who have reading and writing difficulties)
- elderly (somewhat senile people)

and untrained readers like

- the under-educated
- people with social problems
- immigrants and to some extent also
- schoolchildren

2.3 How can we meet the needs of various groups? Can the needs of different groups be united?

Easy-to-read books, then, are aimed at several different groups with limited reading abilities.

Can the needs of different groups really be united? Well, this is a question that has been discussed extensively. How have we answered this question in Sweden? Of course the author must have a reader in mind. And of course there are differences between different types of handicaps, but we have found that there is more to unify these groups than to separate them.

We consider the intellectually disabled as a **primary** group, first of all they with mild to moderate disabilities. The intellectually disabled are the group with the greatest reading difficulties, and they are the most left out of cultural experience.

We can say that we give **particular consideration** to the intellectually disabled in our editorial work.

But this doesn't need to mean that other groups are ignored. **Readers** are found in many other groups. If we make reading easier for the intellectual disabilities, we generally make it easier for other groups as well.

2.4 Difficulty levels

But, easy-to-read is not about just **one** level. Easy-to-read literature is needed for different levels of difficulty. There are differences in reading ability also within groups with reading handicaps. Just keep in mind that people with intellectual disability is not a homogenous group, but ranges from severe to the border of normal intelligence.

This also characterises publishing. Easy-to-read books are easier to read than other books, but their degree of difficulty vary, as well as their contents. We have produced all, from very simple picture-based books, aimed primarily at people with highly limited reading abilities, to adaptations of classics which require a certain level of reading skill. We have also done trials with material for the severely mentally disabled.

There has been some discussion of whether books should be identified by level of difficulty to help readers find the right book. But we have concluded that this is more likely to confuse, and may be experienced as too much like finger-pointing.

Individual differences can, as I have said, be substantial, and the level of material a reader is able to comprehend is determined to a large extent by his or her interest in the topic. Instead of identifying the level of difficulty, we have chosen to emphasise the informative back cover text, and to describe the books in a characteristic way in catalogues and the like.

2.5 Comprehensibility and understanding

By the way, what are reasonable demands to make in regard to comprehensibility and understanding, and what do we actually mean with reading?

What reading is can appear to be obvious, but as we said it's not just a matter of de-coding words. Interest and engagement are of central importance for the outcome of reading a story. A person who is extremely interested in cars and engines can generally read and understand even rather complicated technical articles despite a reading handicap.

But does reading always have to mean reading on one's own? People with severe reading handicaps may get very little from reading a book on their own. But reading an easy-to-read book aloud in a group gives a cultural experience, and not least, reading together with others can mean a great deal as a simple form of common time, for example in an institution. This can also be a chance to read slightly more difficult books, still with benefits for those with severe handicaps. And even if one doesn't understand 100%, the reading time itself can be very pleasant — there is plenty of evidence for this.

Research on the daily culture of the mentally disabled in institutions or group-living apartments has shown that personnel seldom even consider the possibility that newspapers and books could be of any value for these people. But when trials were conducted in which books were passed out and reading time arranged, the results were surprisingly positive. In most cases, the books became a prized possession. More were able to read than one would have thought, and many had more knowledge than expected.

2.6 Fields of interest

What are people with reading handicaps interested in reading about?

The answer is probably rather simple: the same things as other people.

For example, love and excitement are just as popular among the handicapped as among people in general. But what we do not is that adult people want to read about adult matters. Easy-to-read books should be age appropriate.

In Sweden, publication of easy-to-read books began during a time of intense social engagement, a time when people of high ambition aimed to provide the reading disabled with good literature. It must be admitted that this led to splendid but rather boring books. And this stamp has taken a long time to wash off.

So don't be too educational or too cultural. The need is not only for good classical literature, but also for easily digested, entertaining diversions.

2.7 What are the aims of publication?

In Sweden, we attempt to cover a wide area in publication of easy-to-read literature, both in adaptation of classics and other previously published books and in production of books written directly for easy-to-read. Both fiction and non-fiction are included (but not study literature for school). We try to cover a variety of different types of fiction; novels, poetry, mysteries, love, humour, etc. Today we publish 15-20 books a year, some also on audio cassette.

It's not possible for all books to suit all readers in all target audiences. The readers' fields of interest and experiences are almost as important for the success of a book as its readability and comprehensibility. But the circle of readers is often shown to be wider than expected.

What we can do is to make that every book finds its readers, and they can be spread among several groups. This is above all a marketing issue and I will come back to the marketing of easy-to-read products later on.

The books approved by us as ETR books are given the ETR logotype.

2.8 Advice and guidelines for writers and illustrators

Well, how **do** you make a story easy to read, for mentally disabled and others?

When easy-to-read activities began in Sweden as a trial project at the end of the 1960s, there was perhaps a belief that we would find detailed guidelines for easy-to-read work, and, in connection with reading research then underway, we attempted to identify the specific factors which could lead to making a text easy to read.

We have now - more or less - left such attempts behind, as our knowledge and experience have grown.

Do **not** limit the author's freedom too much. Don't put too many restrictions on writers, illustrators and photographers. This is surely one of the most important lessons we have learned from 25 years of working with easy-to-read books. We must never forget that both writing and illustrating are creative jobs that are seldom improved by too much control. It's not possible to write a strict manual for that kind of work. Significant freedom must be left to the creators.

And don't be too pedagogic either! Let fiction be fiction. It has to be fun and stimulating to work with easy-to-read as it has to be in all kind of authorships. It is people who create books and people who read them. Books should entertain and engage and this cannot be moulded into a pre-set form or regulated with directives.

Let writers and others involved experience the **challenges** of easy-to-read work.

Experience has led us to a few broad guidelines, or criteria, for the things that make a text easy to read and understand (and these are important to keep in mind).

- a) Write concretely. Avoid abstractions and transferred concepts
- b) Be logical. The action should follow a common thread with logical continuity
- c) Action should be direct and simple, without long introductions and without too many characters involved
- d) Avoid symbolic language (metaphors) that may be misunderstood by the reader
- e) Be concise. Do not place several actions in a single sentence. Place the words of the same phrase on the same line.
- f) Avoid difficult words, but attempt to use language that is adult and dignified
If unusual words have to be used, they should be explained through context clues.
- g) Even rather complicated relationships can often be described and explained if it's done in a concrete and logical manner, where things take place in a natural chronological framework.

If one follows this general advice — concrete and logical story construction, a common thread in the story line and so on— then we can substantially reduce problems for people with (mild to moderate) **intellectual** disabilities. And this kind of accessibility we believe makes it easier also for other groups with reading difficulties and it is a simplicity that doesn't need not be distracting.

A well-made book in simple language can in fact be a positive experience for anyone to read.

Further more;

- h) Encourage writers and illustrators to get to know their target groups, and to learn more about what it means to have reading difficulties. Let them meet the readers. This makes it possible to work with **their** conditions and experiences in mind.
- i) Test the material. To be sure that material works well, it's a good idea to

test it on a number of people from the target group before it goes to print.

It can be very difficult to write simply. But that is the challenge, something the Swedish author Bengt Erik Hedin has described very well in *The Simple and the Difficult* which is now out in an English translation. To write for easy comprehension can be a tightrope walk between the simple and the banal. But in a short telling of a story, every word becomes more apparent and gains much more importance. The important thing is to have a good story to tell.

It may be particularly difficult to adapt existing literature to easy-to-read. It's not just a question of creating a good easy-to-read text. It's also important that the atmosphere and feeling remains, and that the mark of the original author is still found in the easy-to-read version. But an adaptation is always a **re-telling**, not a translation.

2.9 The importance of pictures

We all know that a picture can say more than a thousand words.

Most of our easy-to-read books — though not all — include photos or drawings to support the text. (Some books are better described as picture stories.) In the context of easy-to-read, pictures often play a more important role than in other types of books.

A picture which **concretely** depicts that which is described in the text improves understanding and clarifies the message of the text.

But a picture may also add another dimension to the text. There has been a lot of discussion about how to use **abstract** pictures in the easy-to-read context. Our experience is that abstract pictures can work well for an easy-to-read audience like the mentally disabled (who understand and interpret the world in a concrete manner). An abstract picture can, for instance, communicate an atmosphere described in a text, strengthen feeling, and so on.

But the picture must agree with the text. A picture which leads in the wrong direction or does not communicate the same feeling as the text, can instead confuse, making reading even harder for people with serious reading difficulties.

2.10 The design of the book

The appearance of a book is also of importance. We want easy-to-read books to be quality products, not just in terms of content, but also in that they look like “real” adult books. In addition the cover should indicate clearly what the book is about and, hopefully, attract the reader.

A person who is unused to reading often chooses a book by its cover design, and it can be a very sensitive matter if the book looks too childish.

2.11 Editorial work. Judgement of easy-to-read material.

As I have already mentioned, we have chosen to start our own publishing house, and for the last year or so we publish most easy-to-read books ourselves.

In practical terms, how is the editorial work carried out?

Editorial work includes in the main following steps:

- a) First, starting new projects. This can include taking initiatives, contacting authors and others and arranging seminars to arouse interest for easy-to-read. But often authors and illustrators come in on their own with ideas, synopses or suggestions.

Often, but not always, authors and illustrators receive a certain payment for the extra work involved in easy-to-read publishing (2,000-3,000 AUD).

- b) During the work the editors will give advice and support to authors and illustrators, through informational material, examples and meetings with readers.
- c) Manuscripts will be reviewed. Editors will often meet with writers and illustrators during the course of the work to discuss the material and give advice, opinions and perhaps suggestions for changes. The material may be tested on readers.
- d) When the editors, writers and illustrators are in agreement that the material works well and is complete, a contract is signed. Standard royalty payments are usually applied.

Decisions about publication take place not earlier than at this stage, and sometimes a project may be terminated.

- e) Designers and layout artists are brought in for graphic design and production.
- f) Finally, a printer is contacted
- g) Afterwards, evaluation takes place.

Clearly, it is important to make contact with handicap organisations or other representatives who know the target audience well, and during the early stages it may be a good idea to form a working group or editorial board to make use of knowledge and collective experience in the editorial work. Writers, illustrators and librarians should be included in this group, and marketing issues must not be ignored.

3 Easy-to-read news information

As I said at the beginning I would like to seize the opportunity to say some words about easy-to-read **information**.

It is a great pleasure to hear that there is interest in publishing an easy-to-read magazine in Australia, and I hope it can soon become a reality. I think this is a

splendid idea

I believe that easily understood information should exist in all countries. This is may be even more an issue of **democratic** rights, than books are. From a democratic point of view, it is clearly of central importance that everyone is able to receive information about what's going on in society. People must be well-informed to be able to exercise their democratic rights and influence their own lives. Insights provide the basis for opinions! And of course, it is also a matter of quality of life.

Our experience in Sweden, referring to news information, shows that many people have a hard time understanding normal news channels. Articles in newspapers are too long, written in language that is too difficult and contains too many specialized terms, and the reader is assumed to have substantial background information in order for the reporting to be comprehensible. Television news flickers by at a pace that is much too rapid for many people.

Not only people with some form of reading handicap who have difficulty understanding the general flow of news. Other groups with a need for easily understandable news information are elderly and those with little education not to mention immigrants, as well as children and young people.

So it can be said that the audience for easily understandable news information is probably even larger than the audience for books. This is also an area where the needs of children and adults come together.

The Swedish 8 PAGES, for example, has proven to function very well, both for school children in the 10 to 12 age group, among adults with little education and among those who are learning Swedish.

3.2 The newspaper 8 PAGES

8 PAGES is a weekly newspaper. It is intended to be a "general newspaper with the character of the daily press," containing the same type of material as is found in traditional papers, only in a shorter and simpler form.

8 PAGES includes domestic and foreign news, sports, culture and more, just like other papers. Articles are short and written in simple Swedish, and most articles are supported by pictures.

8 PAGES is published by the LL Foundation, but it is an independent editorial product.

Some of the material in the paper is written in-house, while some is adapted from news agencies, other papers and other media.

3.3 Newspaper work

As opposed to book publishing, newspaper work is based on maintaining an existing design **concept** and **level of difficulty** of language and article content.

The aim is to communicate news, and even events that are difficult to explain simply should be reported.

The elements which make a news article easy to read are basically the same as those which apply to a book. In standard newspapers, clever headlines, technical terms and symbolic language are common. In an easy-to-read paper, these should be avoided, and the use of the right type of photos is important. A clean and simple layout is essential.

Standard newspapers are often heavy with facts, while articles in Eight pages focus on placing news in a context, providing background and explanations. Some large and complicated issues are very hard to explain briefly. Special features and the like are one way to do this; for example, we are planning a special issue about the EC against the background of Sweden's application for membership.

Not all news can be described simply. But can we expect that all readers understand everything printed in a newspaper? Hand over your hearts, how many really understand everything in a standard paper. And how many are truly interested in everything?

8 PAGES has found its form by trial-and-error, and it has been the subject of research.

The first two years were a trial period with continuous evaluation. The paper was modified as new experience was digested. Having found its form, 8 PAGES has become a model for other easy-to-read papers in Norway, Finland and Italy.

4 Easy-to-read information about society

In addition to news information, it is also important that everyone has access to comprehensible information about society and government, for instance from authorities. To take a couple of examples, I can mention election information and municipal rights and responsibilities.

I understand that Australia has come quite a long way in the field of easy-to-read information about society.

In my country, we see a trend toward increased need for easy-to-read social information. This is a result of two things: first, the status of the disabled has been improved, and, in principal at least, authorities are required to provide all citizens with information in a form that can be understood, that is, information on cassette for the blind and easy-to-read information for people with reading difficulties.

Second, for the last few years a decentralisation process has been underway, aiming at placing decisions about levels of service at a local level as much as possible. And all local agencies are required to make it **their** responsibility to inform the citizenry. I mention this because I believe it illustrates the need for easy-to-read, and issues around easy-to-read are not something odd and out-of-the-way but should be seen as a natural part of every society.

5 Marketing

5.1 Marketing makes special demands

Our experience shows that it's not enough to publish easy-to-read material. There is a lot of work involved in writing an easy-to-read book and then taking it through the production process. But publication is only half of the job. Unfortunately, a good product doesn't sell itself — it must be marketed. And marketing makes special demands.

How do we market a product based on the written word to people who seldom read or visit a library or bookstore?

In marketing, before one reaches the actual point of sale, it is therefore important to work with stimulating a desire to read and other attitudes — both among the reading-impaired themselves and in their surroundings; relatives, personnel and so on. It is often necessary to go through intermediaries before reaching the actual reader.

5.2 Intermediaries

One of the most important experiences in marketing is that when we aim at people with severe cultural handicaps and with little ability to express their own interests (the mentally disabled, people with social handicaps, etc.) traditional marketing is not enough. And it's not only a question of marketing; it's also important to inform, stimulate and affect attitudes.

Not until this has been achieved can marketing efforts, for example in the form of advertising, become effective. Personal contact is also very important in dealing with people who do not normally read. An intermediary of some kind is therefore needed to reach these people.

In order to get effective information and stability in our marketing, we have concluded that an intermediary organisation is needed, locally and regionally anchored in cultural, social or educational programmes, and assigned with the task of contacting prospective readers. For the last year, we have had a project underway to develop a new and improved intermediary organisation.

5.3 Mail order book sales

I would like to say a few words about the mail order sales of easy-to read books which we have conducted for the last year or so. It works in much the same way as a book club, though there is no minimum purchase required. A newsletter catalogue presenting about 25 easy-to-read books is published several times a year. The books presented in the catalogue can be purchased by mail order. The catalogue is also an information material used by the intermediaries.

The reason we began the mail order service was partly that people with reading difficulties seldom go to book stores, but also that retailers were less than enthused about carrying easy-to-read books, since it is a small market with little profit. The book catalogue itself functions as informational material about book publishing in different contexts. After a period of getting established, mail order book sales have developed very well and have shown a profit for the last year.

6 Other media: radio, TV, video

Just a few words about other media. I don't want to limit easily understood material to printed media. Radio and TV also need easy-to-understand programs such as magazine-style programs. And video has a number of advantages when reaching out to people with serious difficulties reading and understanding. In Sweden, we are now testing video book and discussing multimedia projects.

7 Organisation

As you have seen, we in Sweden are tying together publication of easy-to-read and easy-to-understand material in a single organisation, the LL Foundation, with about 12 people employed. This organisation gives us several benefits. We are independent within the framework of our bylaws. We can work quickly and with a minimum of bureaucracy. We have control of every step in the publishing process, from production to sales. By bringing together a wide range of special skills and knowledge, we are able to serve as a resource warehouse for easy-to-read.

8 Economics and financing

Is there a sound economic basis for the publication of easy-to-read books and newspapers?

Or is this an activity which can only be operated with subsidies from the state or charities?

Our publishing in Sweden has a turnover of about the equivalent of 2 million Australian dollars, including slightly less than 1 million for easy-to-read books and slightly more than 1 million for the paper 8 PAGES. Publishing is not self-financing, and since this is seen as part of the government's cultural policy, there is no requirement for this. Publishing is financed by sales income and state subsidies. But do the **conditions** for self-financing exist?

Yes, we see this as being completely realistic. Most of our book titles would pay their own costs with sales of between some 2000 copies. For the time being we do not reach these sales figures, but a contributing factor is the deep recession, which is affecting all sales. I can point out that, a few years ago, sales of 3,000 to 5,000 were not unusual for easy-to-read books.

8 PAGES would break even with about 15,000 subscribers. Current subscription to 8 PAGES is about 6,500. Its Norwegian counterpart, Klar Tale, has done better, and currently has a circulation of about 10,000.

Here in Australia, your situation is clearly better, with a population base that is twice as large - not to mention the advantages of publishing in English and the opportunity to co-operate with other countries.

9 Conclusion

I would like to conclude by wishing you the best of luck in your work. I hope that some of our experiences from Sweden can be useful, and I hope we can continue the exchanges between our countries in the future.

