

## 'How I hid not being able to read or write'



**One in five UK adults struggles with reading and writing. In an age of e-mail, texts and form-filling, how is it possible to hide illiteracy? Linda Worden, who's learned to read and write as part of a Channel 4 series, explains how she managed to keep it a secret for 40 years.**

Thinking back to my schooldays, all I can think of is the pain as I struggled from a young age. Classes were so big that I would just sit quietly at the back, or find any excuse not to be there at all. The older I got the further behind I got, and the less interested the teachers became - it was a vicious circle.

My reports were full of the usual lines "Linda could do better... Linda's lazy..." when in fact I just kept quiet so no-one noticed that I wasn't doing the work that they'd asked for. At home, I was one of eight children, so my parents had enough on their plate.

Leaving school at 16 with no qualifications, I got by without anyone realising the full scale of the problem, including my former husband. Then I had my first daughter, who did everything for me - she was a saint.

From when she could read and write, I made it a game, getting her to read and write for me as if it was practice for her own learning. She was my eyes and hands.

### Child's play

As she grew up and was around less, I was absolutely stumped. There were times when I would miss something important - appointments, bills - I just didn't dare to open the mail.

Forms of any kind filled me with dread. Whenever I had the opportunity, I'd take it home to give to my daughter to complete.

And I'd sell myself, coming across as full of confidence, impressing people at face value. What I lost through not being able to read and write, I gained in other ways. People always commented on my smile and cheerful personality.

I've done all sorts of jobs - including factory work and restaurant work - and wherever that's been I've moved up the ladder. But the minute I received any sort of promotion that would have given my game away, I'd leave.

Similarly with friends, I became very good at keeping myself private, and this extended to my husband. People knew I had difficulties but I was very careful not to let them realise how bad it was. If they became too close, I'd back away. I regret to say that I lost many a good friend.

After years of escaping from one job to another, I set up my own business as an events manager, where I was able to make use of a special voice-activated computer. It has made a huge difference to my life as it writes down what I say, and also reads out things like e-mails to me.

### Making excuses

Despite not being able to read or write, I've got a good memory. I have no trouble with information like directions, remembering routes and landmarks. If people tried to point things out to me on a map, I'd use the old 'I'm a woman so can't read a map' excuse.



Pretending to have forgotten my glasses was a favourite line. When my children were young, I'd avoid events like parents' evenings so I didn't have to discuss their reports.

Going shopping, for example, I just used pictures on the packets to get by. The only time this didn't work was when they changed the label and I'd have to learn to recognise the new one.

Cooking was never a problem. I'm a pretty good chef and became used to creating and adapting my own recipes instead of using cookbooks.

Nowadays, being able to read books for myself is a gift that many people will never appreciate. The world is a much more interesting place than I thought. And after feeling so detached from everyone, I now feel part of the community.

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