



# Literacy

In its 1991 National Literacy Act, Congress defined literacy as: ***"An individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential."*** <http://www.nifl.gov/reders/!intro.htm>

## The Facts

- 40 million adults in the U.S. read and write at or below the 5th grade level (that's 1 in 4 adults??). Source National Center of Adult Literacy
- 21 million Americans cannot read at all.
- 75% of unemployed adults have reading or writing difficulty. Source: National Institute for Literacy
- Illiteracy costs the U.S. \$225 billion per year in lost productivity Source: Literacy Partners, Inc. (NYC)
- Children from middle class homes have had 1,000 – 1,700 hours of one to one experiences with books: children from low income homes only 25 hours!

- A staggering 27% of Army enlistees can't read training manuals written at the 7th grade level.
- 75% of unemployed adults have reading and writing difficulties.
- An estimated 1/2 of all Americans cannot fill out a job application ... 1/3 cannot match their own qualifications to job requirements in classified advertisements.
- An illiterate adult earns 42% less than a high school graduate.
- The U.S. ranks 49th among 156 United Nation member countries in its rate of literacy.
- Source: California Literacy, Inc. - <http://www.covinaliteracy.org/facts.htm>

Very few adults in the U.S. are truly illiterate. Rather, there are many adults with low literacy skills who lack the foundation they need to find and keep decent jobs, support their children's education and participate actively in civic life.

Skills of Adults at Level 1	
Can Usually Perform	Cannot Usually Perform
Sign one's name	Locate eligibility from a table of employee benefits
Identify a country in a short article	Locate intersection on a street map
Locate one piece of information in a sports article	Locate two pieces of information in a sports article
Locate the expiration date information on a driver's license	Identify and enter background information on a social security card application
Total a bank deposit entry	Calculate total costs of purchase from an order form

The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) found a total of 21-23 percent - or **40-44 million** - of the 191 million **American adults** (defined as age 16 or older) **at Level 1, the lowest literacy level.** Although many Level 1 adults could perform many tasks involving simple texts and documents, all adults scoring at Level 1 displayed difficulty using certain reading, writing, and computational skills considered necessary for functioning in everyday life.

<http://www.nifl.gov/reders/!intro.htm>

### The Impact of Low Literacy

**Poverty.** Forty-three percent of adults at Level 1 were living in poverty, compared to 4 percent of those at Level 5.\*

**Welfare.** The likelihood of being on welfare goes up as literacy levels go down. Three out of four food stamp recipients performed in the two lowest literacy levels.

**Income.** Adults at Level 1 earned a median income of \$240 per week, compared to \$681 for those at Level 5.\*

**Employment Status.** Adults at Level 1 worked an average of 19 weeks per year, compared to 44 weeks per year for those at Level 5.\*

**Crime.** Seven in 10 prisoners performed in the lowest two literacy levels.

\* These numbers refer to the score on the prose literacy scale. Similar differences occurred using the quantitative and document scales.

## What does Literacy have to do with Poverty?

**Low literacy skills are closely connected to the social problems related to poverty.** Nearly half (43 percent) of all adults in Level 1 live in poverty. This contrasts with only four to eight percent of those at the two highest literacy levels. <http://www.nifl.gov/readers/intro.htm>

## What are learning disabilities and what is their relationship to literacy?

Learning disabilities (LD) include a wide variety of disorders that are thought to be neurological in origin and that affect one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language. Adults who have difficulties with listening, thinking, speaking, reading, or writing are likely to experience problems that significantly affect their academic achievement and their lives in general. Estimates of LD in the general population range from 3 to 13 percent. **Among adults with low literacy levels, the estimates are much higher - between 30 and 80 percent.** <http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html#US%20literacy>

## Why are so many people at Level 1 ?

Many factors help to explain the relatively large number of adults in Level 1. Twenty-five percent of adults in Level 1 were immigrants who may have just been learning to speak English. More than 60 percent didn't complete high school. More than 30 percent were over 65. More than 25 percent had physical or mental conditions that kept them from fully participating in work, school, housework, or other activities, and almost 20 percent had vision problems that affected their ability to read print. <http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html#US%20literacy>

## For More Information

### National Institute for Literacy

- Frequently Asked Questions <http://www.nifl.gov/>
- Find a Literacy Tutoring Program <http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html>
- NIFL Hotline <http://www.literacydirectory.org/volunteer.asp>  
800-228-8813

### Literacy Volunteers of America

<http://www.literacyvolunteers.org/home/>

### National Literacy Resource List

<http://www.svs.net/wpci/Litfacts.htm#litlist>

### National Literacy Day

September 8<sup>th</sup>