

## Student Assessment and Research-Informed Practice

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### ABE and ESL Beginning Level Students

The Health Literacy Materials have been customized to accommodate the needs of different types of adult literacy students, from beginning to advanced level ABE students, and from beginning to advanced level English language learners.

This version of the Health Literacy Materials was designed for ABE and ESL Beginning Level readers. (Instructors may also find it relevant to Low-Intermediate Level ABE and ESL students.)

### Four Components of Reading

Because proficient readers read effortlessly, it is easy to forget that reading is a skill made possible by several sub skills, or components, working together.

Skilled reading, when it is “unrevealed,” consists of **four separate strands** or components. **Alphabetics** and **Fluency** are considered Print-Based components. **Vocabulary** and **Comprehension** are considered Meaning-Based components. Research has clearly shown that all four strands weave together to create strong, supported reading. The Health Literacy Materials provide instructors and students with activities designed to target all four reading components.

### Student Reading Profiles

The best way to help students make significant improvements in a limited amount of time is to target instruction to the specific areas or skill sets most responsible for their literacy problems. In order to do that, the sub skills must be assessed separately. It can’t be stressed enough how important it is to diagnose and get an accurate picture of the underlying factors that contribute to students’ literacy challenges, as well as their relative strengths.

A student’s **reading profile** combines information from tests of the four different strands or components of reading. A reading profile creates a picture of an individual student’s relative strengths and needs. It can be used diagnostically to drive instructional emphasis and design.

The National Institute for Literacy recommends assessing, at a minimum, the following five literacy sub skills to create a student’s reading profile:

1. Word recognition (**Alphabetics**)
2. Spelling (**Alphabetics**)
3. Oral reading rate (**Fluency**)
4. Word meaning (oral expressive **Vocabulary**)
5. Silent Reading **Comprehension**

As an instructor, you are urged to gather assessment data on these same sub skills for your students. Test scores coupled with information on such factors as language background, educational history, and present literacy activities will allow you to create their personal reading profiles. These reading profiles should be the driving force behind instruction, rather than “shot in the dark” or “one size fits all” approaches.

The National Institute for Literacy provides information on how to obtain scores for all of the above mentioned reading components, as well as other reading sub skills. The Institute also provides a useful student background questionnaire. Follow this link for more information on conducting specific reading component assessments:  
[www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles](http://www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles)

## 11 Sample Profiles

In order to assist adult literacy instructors, the National Institute for Literacy has also created 11 “sample profiles” of adult learners. The 11 sample profiles are based on a very large sampling of adult students’ relative scores on the literacy components tests and their responses on background questionnaires. **Instructors can enter assessment data for their own students on the Institute’s website, and match them to one of these 11 existing profiles.** Information is then given for each profile suggesting instructional emphasis and strategies. The profiles vividly and graphically illustrate the wide variety in skill sets of students in adult basic education programs.

For starters, silent reading comprehension grade equivalents (GE) place students in one of four **general** categories, with which most people will already be familiar:

- GE 0-2 Beginning Readers
- GE 3-5 Low Intermediate
- GE 6-8 Intermediate
- GE 9-12 GED

**It’s what distinguishes the students WITHIN these general categories that really matters, and has powerful implications for instruction.**

A revealing illustration on the National Institute for Literacy’s website allows you to compare and contrast the reading profiles of 3 different adult learners, all of whom have the same silent reading comprehension score (approx. 8th grade equivalent). In other words they all fall squarely in the upper Intermediate level category. What you will see are markedly different scores on the tests of the *other* literacy components: word identification, spelling, vocabulary and fluency.

Comparing and contrasting these three profiles illustrates the relative importance to certain students (especially dyslexic students) of focusing on decoding and alphabetic principles, while for others vocabulary and comprehension strategies are paramount.

It will take a little time to examine these profiles and to read the background information on the students, but doing so is well worth the effort. To view the comparison of three students’ reading profiles follow this link:

[http://www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/MC\\_Compare\\_Profiles.htm](http://www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/MC_Compare_Profiles.htm)

### Research-Informed Practice

The Health Literacy Materials incorporate activities which are designed to strengthen all four reading components: **Alphabetics, Fluency, Vocabulary** and **Comprehension**. All four components are clearly important and interrelated. Working on fluency or word analysis, for example, can lead to improved reading comprehension achievement. Research with adults as well as K-12 children supports teaching the multiple components of reading. Which area(s) to prioritize for instruction and practice should be determined by students' literacy assessment results, ideally their individual reading profiles.

Research clearly tells us that for very beginning and lower level students, a greater instructional emphasis on Alphabetics is almost certainly needed. The term Alphabetics refers to direct instruction in **phonemic awareness** and **word analysis**. Word analysis includes focusing on **phonics** (letter-sound correspondences), **sight word recognition**, and **word-building skills** such as prefixes and suffixes.

A strong line of research clearly demonstrates that adult non readers and beginning readers have almost no phonemic awareness or knowledge of the basic sounds in our language. This develops only as reading develops. Adult beginning readers also have difficulty with decoding or sounding out words. Looking at both the adult and K-12 research, we can conclude that we should provide a significant amount of alphabetic instruction to adult beginning readers including explicit instruction and word analysis.

Research tells us that adult poor readers who report having had difficulty learning to read as children show persisting poor phonemic awareness. Assessment of phonemic awareness of adult readers who are not progressing is always indicated.

(sic) A structured curriculum is what the research says we need with the beginners. (You) move right through (it) in a very systematic way beginning with the most basic elements and progressing.

*Dr. Rosalind Davidson, Dr. John R. Kruidenier, Susan McShane,  
“From Assessment to Practice: Research-Based Approaches to  
Teaching Reading to Adults,” NIFL archived webcast, September 28,  
2007*

The Health Literacy Materials are NOT intended to be a substitute for a structured, systematic alphabetics program in which instructors teach, demonstrate and model language concepts very explicitly, preferably using multi-sensory techniques. Rather, this material supports such approaches by incorporating phonemic and phonological awareness, phonics, word-building and sight word activities, giving opportunities for practice and review. **Alphabetics activities appear under the general heading “Basic Skills.”**

In addition to alphabetics activities, activities aimed at building fluency, vocabulary and comprehension are also provided. All of these critical, literacy-based activities are offered within the context of imparting valuable health literacy information, making this work truly ground-breaking and unique.

### **Pre- and Post Health Literacy Knowledge Assessment**

For adult literacy instructors who plan to use the Health Literacy Materials in their entirety, it is strongly advisable to conduct pre- and post- assessments on students' knowledge, behaviors and attitudes related to health literacy. Even if you do not plan to use all of the material, you are still encouraged to conduct a pre-instruction assessment.

On our website you will find a link to view and print the **Health Literacy Assessment, Answer Key, and Administration Instructions**. This instrument was designed and validated through a lengthy process during the pilot phase of the [Testing the Impact of Health Literacy in Adult Literacy and Integrated Family Approach Programs Research Project](#). The instrument contains health knowledge questions that are specific to these Health Literacy Materials, as well as health intention and self-efficacy questions.

Feedback from literacy instructors in the field indicates that the Health Literacy Assessment, in addition to providing pre- and post-instruction data, is also a valuable pre-instruction tool. Students who complete the pre-assessment say it raised their awareness of how much they didn't know about health topics. Instructors report that conducting the pre-assessment serves as a motivational tool because it generates discussion and focuses students on topics they hope to learn about or realize that they need to learn about.

### **References and Resources**

The National Institute for Literacy has recently published two publications on research-based adult reading instruction:

[Teaching Adults to Read: A Summary of Scientifically Based Research Principles](#)

(link: [http://www.nifl.gov/publications/pdf/teach\\_adults.pdf](http://www.nifl.gov/publications/pdf/teach_adults.pdf) )

The summary focuses on findings from the scientific literature on teaching adults to read. References to research in the Health Literacy Instruction Guide are primarily taken from this publication.

[Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers](#)

(link: <http://www.nifl.gov/publications/pdf/applyingresearch.pdf> )

Designed for teachers and tutors, First Steps provides ideas and examples of how to use research-based instructional approaches in the adult education classroom.

Also of interest are the National Institute for Literacy archived webcasts -

“From Assessment to Practice: Research-Based Approaches to Teaching Reading to Adults”  
– Part 1: Alphabets and Comprehension” (September 28, 2007)

<http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/webcasts/assesspractice/webcast0928.html>

and

– Part 2: Fluency and Vocabulary” (January 11, 2008)

<http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/webcasts/assesspractice2/webcast0111.html>