



The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey: Shining a light on literacy in Nova Scotia

What is the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey?

The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, or IALSS, is the Canadian part of the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) study. This large international study tells us how well adults understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in their communities.

The first survey was conducted in 1994. In the second survey, conducted in 2003, more than 23,000 Canadians 16 and older took part. In Nova Scotia, 1,928 people responded. They were selected from the 2001 census.

The survey changes the way we talk about literacy. In the past, people often used the terms “literate” and “illiterate” to describe people’s skills. They believed people either had literacy skills or didn’t have them. Now, we define literacy skills on a scale from very low to very high.

This document will help you understand more about the state of literacy in Canada and in Nova Scotia.

What does IALSS measure?

The survey measures the knowledge and skills people need to understand and use information in the following four areas:

1. **Prose literacy** – reading texts such as newspaper stories, brochures and instruction manuals
2. **Document literacy** – using job applications, payroll forms, maps, tables, diagrams and charts
3. **Numeracy** – balancing an account, figuring out a tip, working out interest on a loan, or filling out an order form
4. **Problem-solving** – understanding and solving problems

The skills are measured on a continuous scale and are assigned levels. Level 1 is the lowest and Level 5 the highest.

Level	What it means
1	a person has difficulty dealing with any printed material
2	a person can deal with material that is clear and well laid out
3	a person can understand and use the information they need for daily life
4	a person can understand and use complex written material
5	a person can understand and use increasingly complex written material

Level 3 is what experts believe people need to get and keep a job in today’s knowledge-based economy. Ideally, the average literacy score should be level 3 and above.

What does IALSS tell us about literacy in Canada and in Nova Scotia?

- 1) **Millions of Canadians struggle with serious literacy challenges.** Internationally, Canada ranks third. That puts us “in the middle of the pack.” That may sound fairly good, but a closer look shows us . . .
 - ◆ 42% of Canadians (four out of ten people) aged 16-65 were at levels 1 and 2 in prose literacy – below the level of skills they need in the modern world.
 - ◆ If you add people aged 66 and older, that figure rises to 48%, or almost one-half of the Canadian population: Roughly 12 million people in Canada are below level 3.
 - ◆ The percentage of people at these lower levels has not changed since the last survey in 1994, but the actual number of people with low literacy has increased. In 1994, there were 7.7 million adults with low literacy. There were 8.9 million in 2003.
 - ◆ The average prose literacy score for Canadians 16 to 65 is at the low end of level 3 and has not changed since 1994.

- 2) **Low literacy is a serious challenge in Nova Scotia.** The average score in all skill areas is about the same as the Canadian national average.
 - ◆ Roughly 38% of working age adults (16 to 65) had an average prose literacy score below level 3. That’s almost 4 out of 10 people.
 - ◆ Half of working age adults had an average numeracy score below level 3.
 - ◆ Almost ¾ of adults older than 15 had an average problem solving score below level 3.

- 3) **In Nova Scotia, there is a large range of abilities among different groups.**
 - ◆ 212,670 people over the age of 20 in Nova Scotia do not have a high school diploma, according to 2001 census data.
 - ◆ 80% of seniors older than 65 have prose literacy skills in levels 1 or 2, compared with an average of around 38% in the general population.
 - ◆ 60% of youths 16 to 25 have prose skills at level 3 or above.
 - ◆ In Canada, about 60% of immigrants were at levels 1 and 2 in English or French. Although immigrants tend to be more educated in their mother tongue than in the past, many do not have proficiency in English or French.
 - ◆ No specific data is available for francophones in Nova Scotia. About 4% of Nova Scotians speak French only or English and French. In provinces other than Quebec, about 62% scored below level 3 on the prose literacy scale when they took the test in French.

- ◆ In Nova Scotia, 56% of people at level 1 are men, while at level 2, the percentages of men and women are even.
- 4) **In all provinces and territories, those with the lowest literacy levels do not take part in adult education and training as often as those with the highest levels.** The people who need training the most are the least likely to attend adult education and training programs. In Atlantic Canada, about 65% of people at level 4/5 participated in training, while only about 21% at level 1 did.
 - 5) **Generally, literacy levels strongly affect our health.** 16 to 65 year-olds in poor health have lower than average document literacy scores. People need document literacy skills to find and use information in forms, applications and charts. This is particularly important when accessing health care and social services, not to mention obtaining employment. Poverty and low literacy are key determinants of health.
 - 6) **People with higher literacy have a better rate of employment than people with lower literacy. More knowledge-intensive jobs require higher levels of literacy.** 47% of people at level 1 and 60% of people at level 2 in the Atlantic region were employed. While many people at lower literacy levels are working, the demand of the labour market for higher skill levels is increasing. This means that the jobs themselves are changing, and workers with lower skill levels cannot always maintain their employment.
 - 7) **A strong foundation in literacy and numeracy leads to more educational success.** In all four literacy skill areas, higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of literacy. The average literacy score among university graduates in every province and territory was level 3 or above.
 - 8) **Workers higher in literacy proficiency tend to earn more, especially women.** The average literacy level of people earning less than \$20,000 a year was level 2. For those making \$60,000 and more, the average score was level 3.

Conclusion

All Canadians have the right to develop the literacy and essential skills they need in order to participate fully in our social, cultural, economic and political life.

Every person must have an equal opportunity to acquire, develop, maintain and enhance their literacy skills regardless of their circumstances.

Literacy is at the heart of learning. A commitment to learning throughout life leads to a society characterized by literate, healthy and productive individuals, families, communities and workplaces. (November 20, 2005)

These words, from the report by the Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills to the Minister of State for Human Resource Development, are supportive of adult literacy. Yet we can see from the 2003 IALSS report that access to adult literacy and learning opportunities is far from equal across the province and across the country. We can also see that the overall literacy picture has remained more or less the same for almost a decade.

According to the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC) *Report Card* for March 2006, “Without a stronger commitment to [improving literacy skills], the Atlantic region and many of its citizens risk being marginalized in an economic environment that places an increasing premium on knowledge, skills and adaptability.” In addition to being a basic human right, literacy means economic and democratic inclusion in our province and country.

Who is responsible for ensuring a culture of lifelong learning in Nova Scotia? Without clear and specific public policy and sustained, long-term funding for literacy, up to 40% of Nova Scotians may be left behind. Unable to compete in the labour market, to access the services and supports needed to enjoy a healthy lifestyle, and to create a home and community environment that encourages learning for life, the cycle of low literacy will continue.

What needs to be done? Adult learners, governments, workplaces, schools and communities all have a role to play in changing the way we think about adult learning and literacy. As Nayda Veeman, former head of the Saskatchewan Literacy Network, said recently in an interview with CBC television, “Adult education is like a train. You should be able to get on it when you want and get off when you want. You should know where it's going and you shouldn't have barriers to get on. And that's what we don't offer.”

For more information on this or other literacy matters, contact:

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Nayda Veeman's quote is from CBC TV's *The National*, May 24, 2006: *Canada's shame*. Reporter: Dan Bjarnason. Producer: Alex Shprintsen. Visit www.cbc.ca/news/background/education/canada-shame.html.

All statistical information in this document is from Statistics Canada. Visit www.statcan.ca/start/html. You can also visit the National Adult Literacy Database at www.nald.ca. Literacy NS thanks the Northwest Territories Literacy Council for allowing us to use their excellent pamphlet, *The International Adult Literacy & Skills Survey, Info Series #1*, as a template for this document. Funding for the development and distribution of this document was provided by the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program of Human Resources and Social Development Canada.