

# Summary of the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) Report

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) recently released the results of the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) Report. It describes the status of adult literacy in the United States and reports on national trends. To view the entire report go to, <<http://nces.ed.gov/naal>>.

The study defines adult literacy as *“a person’s ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve goals, and to develop knowledge and potential.”*

It employed a nationally representative sample of English speaking adults (based on 2003 US census bureau statistics) who were asked to perform three types of literacy tasks, using materials that are part of their daily life.

Prose reading materials were arranged in sentences and paragraphs. Examples included newspaper articles.

Documents (not organized in sentences) included bills, maps, bus schedules and prescription labels.

Quantitative activities required simple calculations using numbers found in written materials such as tax forms or bank statements.

It is important to note that 2% of the population or 4 million adults were found not to speak English well enough to participate in the survey at all and are not included in the results that follow:

14% or 30 million adult Americans are functioning at the **Below Basic** literacy skill level.

- ♦ They can perform only the most simple and concrete literacy tasks, such as signing a form.
- ♦ They are likely to be living in poverty, unable to participate in their children’s education.

29% or 63 million are functioning at the **Basic** level.

- ♦ They have some literacy skills and can perform simple everyday tasks like finding a program in a TV Guide or comparing the prices of two tickets to a sporting event.
- ♦ They are unlikely to have the skills required to be gainfully employed or economically self-sufficient.
- ♦ They will struggle in an increasingly complex and information driven society, and will be unprepared to perform the jobs of the future.

*(For more information on this subject visit the National Association of Manufacturer’s website [www.nam.org](http://www.nam.org) and read their 2005 Skills Gap report.)*

44% or 95 million adults are functioning at the **Intermediate** level.

- ♦They can do moderately challenging tasks such as calculate the cost of an order from an office supply catalog, identify a specific location on a map and consult a reference book to determine which foods contain a certain vitamin.
- ♦This is the average reading level of American adults and includes many college graduates.

13% or 28 million are functioning at the **Proficient** level.

- ♦They can perform more complex and challenging literacy activities like interpreting a table about blood pressure, age and physical activity or comparing two editorial viewpoints.

It is estimated that 10.5 million of the 93 million Americans who are functioning at the **Basic and Below Basic** literacy levels live in California.

- ♦They are the target of library based adult literacy programs.
- ♦Collectively these programs serve approximately 20,000 adult learners each year.

California Library Literacy Services (CLLS) has been serving this population since 1984. CLLS programs make it possible for Californians to reach their literacy goals by providing individualized, goal-oriented literacy services delivered primarily through trained volunteers. For more information about CLLS, please visit <http://literacyworks.org/clls> or contact your local library literacy program.



*This summary was compiled and  
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