

Working with learners who are reading at entry level

This resource for educators was developed by the National Centre of Literacy and Numeracy for Adults in 2010. It contains 4 modules:

- Module 1: Identifying strengths and learning needs
- Module 2: Vocabulary
- Module 3: Comprehension
- Module 4: The Reading Programme

Module 1: Identifying strengths and learning needs

This module focuses on what to find out about learners who are reading at the initial steps described in *Starting Points*. The module covers:

- the importance of finding out about learners' language and literacy practices
- phonological awareness
- assessing and addressing learners' decoding knowledge and skills.

Module 1 has 4 sections:

1. Section A: An introduction to entry-level readers
2. Section B: A brief look at oral language
3. Section C: Phonological awareness
4. Section D: Decoding

Section A: An introduction to entry-level readers

1. Adult learners reading at entry level

The purpose of this online module is to guide educators to develop the knowledge and skills that will support their work with adult learners who are reading at entry level. These adults are working below or just at the first steps described in the Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy.

In this section we explore:

- general profiles of adult learners operating at entry level in reading
- why and how to find out about adults' language and literacy practices, as well as any specific factors that might be barriers to their developing expertise in reading.

2. What do we know about learners at this level?

A significant number of New Zealand adults do not have the literacy-related knowledge and skills that enable them to read the texts they encounter in their everyday lives. For an in-depth look at these learners you can find a number of reports which analyse the New Zealand data from the international Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) Survey taken in 2006 on the [Education Counts website](#).

Migrants who are learning English make up a large proportion of adults in the lower literacy levels. However, there are also many Pakeha, Māori and Pasifika adults whose first language is English. Most of this group have been through the New Zealand school system.

3. What is involved in adults' reading?

Adults need to be able to read a range of everyday material with understanding. This requires:

- an understanding of how speech sounds relate to print
- decoding skills
- fluency
- vocabulary and background knowledge
- comprehension strategies

- a motivation to read.

These components are described on pages 20-28 in the [Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy and Numeracy: Background Information](#).

Many adults who are having difficulty reading have spiky profiles. This means that they have distinct strengths and weaknesses in different reading components.

4. Typical profiles of entry-level adult learners of reading

However, there are three main groups of adult learners who are operating at entry level. They are:

- Adults who have good listening comprehension skills but poor decoding skills. They can understand texts they hear, but cannot read these texts efficiently by themselves. This group includes adults who may have dyslexia.
- Adults with poor listening comprehension and good decoding skills. They can decode texts, but not understand them well. This group will include adults whose first language is not English.
- Adults with poor listening comprehension and poor decoding skills. This group will have multiple instructional needs.

5. What's needed for an effective literacy programme?

- Effective literacy programmes provide explicit teaching of the knowledge and skills that learners need along with opportunities to practise, in contexts that are meaningful and purposeful.
- When adults have low levels of reading skills, fine-grained and specific assessment is needed to determine exactly what their skills and needs are in order to maximise instruction.
- No single measure of reading achievement will be able to identify an individual's strengths and learning needs. The Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool will probably not be suitable because it requires adult learners to be able to decode. Other general assessment will only have a few items at the lowest levels, and therefore will not provide the detailed information needed for planning instruction.

6. First things to find out about learners

However, it's important to gather some general information about learners who are at entry level before you start investigating specific reading knowledge and skills. In the next section you'll be guided to:

- review any information you already have about learners
- become more familiar with the kinds of things you need to find out using an initial survey
- consider some factors that may have impacted on the learner's reading that you need to work through, and either eliminate, or take action on.

7. Reflecting on the information you have already

It's possible that there is already information that has been gathered about learners that will provide some understanding about their strengths and needs, for example:

- enrolment data
- assessment tasks that you have used already
- reading behaviour that you have noticed

Take some time to review and reflect on this information. Think about which of the three broad profiles learners belong to. Do you have learners in each of these groups?

This will shape the way you plan your approach to teaching, including the kind of information that you will need to gather from specific assessment tasks or procedures.

8. Finding out about learners' literacy practices

Literacy is a social and cultural practice. The tools and materials that have been developed to support adult learning in New Zealand, including the Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy, are based on this understanding, along with what is known about developing expertise. You can read more about this on pages 12 - 14 of the Background Information to the progressions. It is important to find out about learners' language and literacy practices so that you can take account of their strengths and interests when you are planning how to address their needs.

The best way to begin to know more about learners is to have a one-to-one structured conversation with them.

9. Using the initial survey

Take a look at the Initial Survey on pages 33-36 in Appendix A of the [Starting Points: Assessment Guide](#).

This survey was developed after looking at several examples provided by educators, and in consultation with a range of experts. The questions are intended to form the basis of a conversation between you and the learner.

- Full instructions on how to administer and use the survey are provided on pages 8 and 9 of the Assessment Guide.
- Note that the questions in bold-faced italics are for ESOL adults.
- Note, also, that questions 13, 14, and 15 are not appropriate for adults who have yet to have any formal education.

10. Resisting the temptation to "get on with teaching"

While it might seem to take a lot of time to work through the survey with each learner, the information you gather about learners' literacy practices, experiences and attitudes is critical to being able to plan and implement an effective teaching and learning programme.

As well as guiding your next steps, the information from the initial survey will help shape the kinds of language and literacy experiences you plan for learners: the contexts you select when you want learners to apply the reading knowledge and skills you teach.

In most cases, learners will need explicit teaching of specific skills and knowledge followed by plenty of opportunity to practise. They are more likely to want to read when they have a clear and meaningful purpose for reading and the texts match their interests.

11. Factors that affect learning

Having found out more about learners' language and literacy practices, you might decide that you need to find out if there are any specific factors that have affected a learner's ability to develop reading and writing knowledge and skills. Such factors include:

- problems with hearing or vision
- issues created because of lack of opportunity to learn (for example through irregular attendance in formal education)

- the challenges of learning English as a second language
- issues that could be associated with dyslexia. You can read more about dyslexia on page 10 of the *Starting Points Assessment Guide*.

A set of eliminating questions to help you check if these factors are an issue is provided in the *Starting Points Assessment Guide*.

12. Using the eliminating questions

Look at the eliminating questions on pages 37 and 38 of the Starting Points Assessment Guide. Click here to download the [Starting Points Assessment Guide](#)

The eliminating questions provide suggestions as to what steps to take if you think that a particular issue is a possible factor in an adult learner's literacy development. Some factors require the learner to be referred to a specialist.

With information gathered from the Initial Survey and possibly, the Eliminating Questions, you will have a better sense of where to start to investigate the specific knowledge and skills the learner needs to draw on to read.

To find out more about adult reading, we suggest you read the report by John Kruidenier that describes the research and its implications for practice. Click here to download a copy of [Research based principles for adult basic education reading instruction](#)

13. Next steps

- In this section you've considered what it takes for an adult to be a competent reader, and looked at the general profiles of adults who are at entry level.
- You've gathered some information about learners' reading, their experiences in learning to read, and you have gained some insights into their motivation and sense of self efficacy.
- In the next section we will look at the importance of oral language in underpinning reading.

Section B: A brief look at oral language

1. Oral language

This section takes a brief look at oral language, in order to make sure that it's featuring from the start as you design a literacy programme to meet the needs of entry-level readers.

Oral language – in particular vocabulary - will also be the focus of a section in each of the next two modules in this resource.

“Reading and writing float on a sea of talk”

James Britton, educationist

2. Is oral language the problem?

- If your initial investigations suggest that a learner can decode texts but is having difficulty understanding what they “read”, the first thing to check is their oral language.
- In many cases these adults will be English learners, so you will already be working with them to develop their vocabulary and their knowledge of how English works. The tools and materials that English Language Partners provide online are particularly helpful. They can be found at www.englishlanguage.org.nz.
- In other cases, adults whose first language is English will have a limited vocabulary and will only be familiar with a narrow range of text forms and features.

3. The role of oral language in supporting reading

- Readers’ understanding of written text is based on their understanding of the vocabulary and the language structures used in the text, along with their background knowledge.
- For suggestions for working with adult learners to develop their oral language refer to *Teaching Adults to Listen and Speak to Communicate*. [Click here to download Teaching Adults to Listen and Speak to Communicate: Using the Learning Progressions](#) .
- *Starting Points: Supporting the Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy*. [Click here to view the online version of this document](#).

- *Starting Points: Assessment Guide* pages 11 and 12. Questions that can help you assess learners' oral language are provided in the Appendix on page 39. [Click here to download the online version of this document.](#)

4. Listening vocabulary

Listening vocabulary refers to understanding as well as recognising words and phrases in oral language. This includes an understanding of how words work in relation to each other, and in different contexts.

Take time to review your understanding of listening vocabulary. Refer to:

- [Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy and Numeracy: Background Information pages, pp. 12-13, and pp. 23-24](#)
- [Starting Points: Supporting the Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy pages, pp. 14-17](#)

5. Assessing vocabulary

Vocabulary assessments were introduced to the Assessment Tool in 2012 and are available to be used with learners.

The Vocabulary Assessments are most appropriate for students with very low reading skills, i.e. working at Starting Points or at the lower Steps of the Learning Progressions. They provide one way to assess students who are not yet able to complete a Reading assessment using the Assessment Tool.

6. Next steps

In the next section we will look at phonological awareness- the ability to hear and work with the sounds in words. It's an important foundation for decoding texts, and one that needs to be investigated before engaging learners with print.

Section C: Phonological awareness

1. Phonological awareness

This section focuses on phonological awareness. It looks at the aural skills that learners need in order to read. These include being able to distinguish and manipulate:

- syllables
- onsets and rimes
- phonemes

Most of the essential knowledge and skills relating to phonological awareness are finite. There is a relatively small set to learn. It's important to identify any gaps learners might have, so that they can be systematically addressed.

2. What is phonological awareness?

Phonological awareness is an overall understanding of the sound systems of language. The key understanding is an awareness that words are made up of combinations of sound.

Consider this definition from Marcia Henry from *Unlocking Literacy-Effective Decoding and Spelling Instruction (pg3)* - "**Decoding is the ability to pronounce a word subvocally in silent reading or vocally in oral reading**".

If your initial investigations suggest that a learner is having difficulty decoding text, the first thing to check is their phonological awareness. Can the learner hear and manipulate sounds?

3. The "levels" of phonological awareness

Phonological awareness operates at increasingly fine-grained levels as illustrated in this table.

LEVEL	EXAMPLES		
word	bed	black	napkin
syllable	bed	black	nap-kin
onset-rime	b-ed	bl-ack	n-ap k-in
phonemes	/b/-/e/-/d/	/b/-/l/-/a/-/ck/	/n/-/a/-/p/-/k/-/i/-/n/

Because learners often have a partial awareness - not an “all or nothing” understanding - you will need to investigate learners’ awareness at each level through careful assessment.

To refresh your understanding, read the sections on phonological awareness on pages 18-22 in *Starting Points: Supporting the Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy*.

4. Syllable awareness

- A syllable is a unit of speech that has a vowel phoneme. Syllable awareness is the ability to hear that run has one syllable; paper has two syllables (pa/per); and remember has three syllables (re/mem/ber)
- Although most adults have acquired the ability to break words into syllables without thinking about it, there are some adult learners who have trouble with this.
- See page 14 *Starting Points: Assessment Guide* for a description of the six main ways that syllables are coded. Take time to practise these aloud, so that you are better able to support learners. Click here to download the [Starting Points Assessment Guide](#)

5. Syllable awareness using Starting Points

An activity that enables you to assess learners’ syllable awareness is provided on page 15 in the *Starting Points Assessment Guide*.

- Remember that this activity helps you assess the sounds the learner hears. Do not ask the learner to read it.
- [Watch Professor Tom Nicholson assessing Mao’s syllable awareness.](#)

6. Syllable awareness: next steps

- You can use the same activities used in the assessment for teaching and practice purposes. Target those kinds of syllables that the learner had trouble with, and just focus on them. There is no need to go over the kinds of syllables they already know.
- There are suggestions in both [Starting Points guides](#).
- Teaching and practising syllables, as with all the phonological awareness activities, can be made really enjoyable by using contexts that engage learners.
- Remember that learners should not be engaging with printed text during these activities. It's all done by ear.

7. Onset rime awareness

- Onset and rimes are important because they are the middle ground between hearing syllables in words and distinguishing phonemes.
- Take time now to re-read the explanation of onset-rime awareness on page 15 in *Starting Points: Assessment Guide*.
- Now watch Tom [Nicholson checking Mao's onset-rime awareness](#). This is the [follow-up clip](#). As you watch, think about the kind of follow-up activities you could do with Mao.
- Having watched Tom and Mao, you will easily see that integrating a few onset and rime activities into a teaching session is relatively straightforward. The key is to be quite deliberate about targeting only those areas the learner needs to practise – and make it fun. Most people enjoy playing with sounds, especially rhymes. Some even make their living out of it!

8. Phonemic awareness

- Phonemes are the smallest segments of sound in spoken language. They distinguish one word from another. There are 42-46 phonemes in English (depending on the dialect). Some sounds, for example /th/ do not occur in most other languages.
- Many adults who are having difficulty reading have poor phonemic awareness. You can read about some of the studies of these adults in Kruidenier's report. Click here to download Kruidenier's report [Research based principles for adult basic education reading instruction](#)
- Explicit instruction that helps these adults develop phonemic awareness is necessary for them to be able to both decode and encode (spell) printed

text. Again, you need to know what learners don't know so that you can focus on that. Adult learners, like younger learners, do not need to be taught things they already know.

9. Phonemic awareness 1

- Assess phonemic awareness to find out how well learners can identify and manipulate the small segments of sound. There is an assessment activity in [Starting Points: Assessment Guide](#) (appendix A.6) that can be used for this.
- Read this assessment procedure, saying the sounds out loud.
- Now watch [Tom Nicholson working with Mao](#) to check his phonemic awareness. This is the [follow-up clip](#).

10. Giving syllable feedback to learner

- Use your analysis of the learner's responses to decide what to focus on. Again, only work on those areas that need further practice. If learners are not secure with syllables and onsets and rimes, start with these first, rather than phonemes.
- You can use the activities in the assessment tasks as teaching tasks.
- In [this video](#) you can watch Tom Nicholson giving Mao some feedback about his phonological awareness.

It's clear that Mao is not having difficulties with phonological awareness. Tom can now look at how well Mao is decoding printed text.

Section D will focus on decoding, using readers' phonological awareness to translate written text in language.

Section D: Decoding

1. Decoding

This section focuses on what's needed in order for readers to decode written text. It looks at:

- concepts about print
 - identifying letters by name, and providing sounds for each letter
 - assessing and teaching decoding
 - the importance of sight words in developing fluency
- Section C looked at phonological awareness. As you work through this section, reflect on how this awareness, particularly phonemic awareness, supports readers to decode.

2. What is decoding?

- There are two major aspects to reading: decoding and comprehension.
- Decoding is the ability to read words by translating written symbols into the sounds of spoken language. This is done either orally or silently. Decoding is sometimes called “word identification”. When readers do not recognise a word in its printed form, they use their knowledge of the relationships between letters and sounds to translate it into spoken language. Once they “hear” the word, they will either know it or not, depending on their listening vocabulary.
- Adults reading at entry level are often poor decoders. This means that they cannot read fluently enough to read with understanding.

3. What do readers need to do in order to decode?

- Readers need to have some concepts about print in place so that they know what to expect from written text. These concepts concern the rules and conventions of written text.
- As they decode, readers draw on knowledge that includes:
 - the names of the letters of the alphabet, along with the sounds that each letter makes; and
 - an understanding of the relationships between letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes)

- Fluent readers are also able to recognise words automatically without needing to decode them by sounding them out. These words are called “sight words”.

4. Concepts about print

- Readers need to know the conventions and practices of engaging with print in English— such as left to right text direction, one-to-one matching, and the role of simple text features (layout, diagrams).
- Most readers develop these concepts through exposure to print from an early age. Some adults might need to be explicitly taught these concepts, especially if they are English language learners. Others will have some surprising gaps that are easily addressed.
- It’s also possible that adult learners at entry level are only familiar with a narrow range of texts. It’s important that their understanding is extended to include the basic features of texts such as digital texts.

5. Assessing concepts about print

- Adult learners can be assessed by observing the way they engage with print. Look for ways they demonstrate their understanding of how different kinds of text (including digital text) works, for example when they are looking for information from diagrams or illustrations.
- There is a set of questions in [Starting Points: Assessment Guide](#) (appendix A.7) that can be used if you think you need to observe learners’ concepts about print more closely.
- Watch [Tom Nicholson observe Anton’s understanding](#) about how text works.

6. Letter identification

- Most adults will be able to identify the upper and lower cases of the letters of the alphabet. However, it’s possible that they will know the name of the letter, but might not know all the sounds that the letters make, particularly those letters that have more than one sound.
- There is a template in the *Starting Points: Assessment Guide* that can be used to check learners’ ability to identify letters. You will need two copies: one for the learner and the other to record your observation.
- Watch [Tom Nicholson observe Anton’s knowledge of letters](#).

7. Assessing decoding using non-words

- Assessing decoding skills is more effective when learners are asked to decode non-words (or pseudo-words). These are made-up words that can be decoded by “sounding out” the letters.
- Using non-words means that learners aren’t able to rely on their existing knowledge of real words, and instead have to use their letter-sound knowledge.
- There are a number of decoding tests available. We think that the Bryant test is particularly useful, and have provided copies for both the learner and educator in the *Starting Points: Assessment Guide* (appendices A.9a and A.9b).
- Watch [Tom Nicholson to find out how Jayde decodes](#) these “alien” words.

8. Decoding: next steps

- The instructional approach to teaching decoding is called phonics. Most educators will be aware that there is an ongoing debate about the place of phonics in literacy programmes. However, it is clear that if learners are not able to decode text because they don’t know all or some of the letter-sound (grapheme-phoneme) relationships, then they need to be taught these. Such teaching needs to be deliberate and systematic.
- Again, you should only teach what the learner does not know. Sometimes phonics programmes get “bad press” because they have been implemented as a total package, regardless of what learners already know.
- Watch [Tom Nicholson giving feedback to Anton’s tutor](#) about areas to work on.

9. Deliberate teaching - context

- Suggestions for teaching decoding are provided in both *Starting Points* guides. It is more efficient to teach the knowledge and skills readers draw on to decode by focusing on them out of a context. However, look for examples of them in the texts that learners are reading and writing.
- Provide learners with plenty of opportunity to practise their decoding knowledge and skills using texts that are meaningful, rather than worksheets. In the final module in this series, we will look at different resources that have been designed specifically for New Zealand adult learners for this purpose.

10. Recognising words by sight

- Sight words are the words that a reader recognises instantly, without needing to sound them out. They are stored in the visual memory, and this instant recall is known as “automaticity”
- Readers need to build their bank of sight words so that they can read fluently. Fluency is important for comprehension.
- Most readers’ sight words are also high-frequency words, that is, the words that occur most often in written English. An individual reader will also have a number of sight words that are personal to them – like their name and the names of family members- or words that are of special interest to them or that they have read many times because they are in their environment. You can read about environmental print on page 33 in *Starting Points: Supporting the Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy*.

11. Assessing and learning sight words

- There are a number of lists of sight words – with the majority of words being the same across all lists.
- *The Starting Points: Assessment Guide* (appendices A.10a and A.10b) include a list of sight words. This list of sight words includes high-frequency words that are not easily decodable because they do not conform to regular letter-sound relationships.
- Many adults at entry-level reading have a relatively good bank of sight words. [Watch Anton read this list to Tom Nicholson](#).
- If learners don’t know any of the words, they simply have to learn them so that they can become fluent readers. The most effective way to do this is by reading the words in isolation, for example on a flash card, not by trying to learn them in a context. Speed is important, so games that involve timing work well.

12. Finally

- By working through this module, taking time to try out the assessment activities and read the recommended reading, you will have a good idea of where to start with adult learners who are at entry-level reading.
- In Module 3 we will look at supporting these learners to develop their comprehension. In doing this we will also look at ways to develop their vocabulary.