

Literacy in Canada

More than 40% of Canadian adults do not have strong literacy skills

Canada and the International Adult Literacy Survey

In June 2000, Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released the final report of the groundbreaking 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The first international survey of its kind, IALS compares literacy levels across nations, languages and cultures.

Canada and 21 other countries participated in the survey, which defined literacy as: *the ability of adults to use written information to function in society, to achieve their goals and to develop their knowledge and potential*. IALS identified and measured three types of literacy:

- **prose literacy:** the ability to understand and use information from texts such as news stories or fiction
- **document literacy:** the ability to find and use information from documents such as maps or tables
- **quantitative literacy:** the ability to make calculations with numbers embedded in text, as in balancing a cheque book

Canadians' Literacy Levels

IALS measured proficiency at five different levels (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) within each of the three literacy types. Here is how Canadians, aged 16 and older, scored in prose literacy:

- **22% of Canadians are at level 1.** People at this level have difficulty reading and have few basic skills or strategies for decoding and working with text. Generally, they are aware that they have a literacy problem.
- **26% of Canadians are at level 2.** These are people with limited skills who read but do not read well enough. Canadians at this level can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out. They often do not recognize their limitations.
- **33% of Canadians are at level 3.** They can read well but may have problems with more complex tasks. This level is considered by many countries to be the minimum for successful participation in society.
- **20% of Canadians are at levels 4 or 5.** People at these levels have strong literacy skills, including a wide range of reading skills and many strategies for dealing with complex materials. These Canadians can meet most reading demands and can handle new reading challenges.


How Canada Compares

- On the prose literacy scale, Canada ranked 5th among the 20 countries surveyed, behind Sweden, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands.
- On the document and quantitative literacy scales, Canada was closer to the middle, ranking 8th and 9th respectively.
- Canada consistently outranked the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand on all three literacy scales.
- Canada was second only to Sweden in terms of the proportion of adults aged 16 to 65 at the very highest literacy levels.
- Among Canadian participants there is a wide range between very high and very low scores on the prose literacy scale. IALS showed that the gap between people with low and high literacy skills was far larger in Canada than in European countries such as Denmark, Norway, Germany, Finland and Sweden.

What Else Did We Learn from IALS?

- Literacy development is strongly influenced in the early years by a child's family environment and the parent's educational background.
- The higher a nation's literacy skills, the more likely its population will have healthier habits and lifestyles.
- Those with higher literacy skills tend to be more involved citizens who participate in their communities and in society.
- Literacy is linked to economic success. Literacy levels determine the kind of jobs people find, the salaries they make and their ability to upgrade their work skills.
- Literacy contributes to society's overall economic and social performance.
- Literacy is not a fixed asset. It operates on the 'use-it-or-lose-it' principle. Like muscles, skills can deteriorate if not used. Those who read, write and use numbers regularly have higher literacy levels.
- Education strongly influences literacy but is not the only factor. Some less-educated people who use their literacy skills regularly have higher literacy levels than well-educated people who do not practice their literacy skills.

Suggested *Canadian Literacy Resources*

 **International Adult Literacy Survey** is available for purchase online through Statistics Canada at www.statcan.ca or tel: 1-800-263-1136.

✓ **Movement for Canadian Literacy**, online at www.literacy.ca or tel: 613-563-2464.

✓ **National Literacy Secretariat**, online at www.nald.ca/nls.htm or tel: 613-946-1388



- indicates an item that is in Literacy BC's collection. Visit the collection on-line at <http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/catalogue/>

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