

### Section 3

# Supporting Skills for Life: language, literacy, numeracy and Key Skills

This section has some suggestions about how you can support development of your learners' language and communication skills through your teaching. Improved language skills will help learners access all learning materials more effectively and will contribute to independent learning.

The Learner workbook includes some simple features that focus attention on improving spelling and reading skills. It will be helpful if you draw these skills to your learners' attention as you work through the activities.

## **Readability: what do teachers and trainers need to know?**

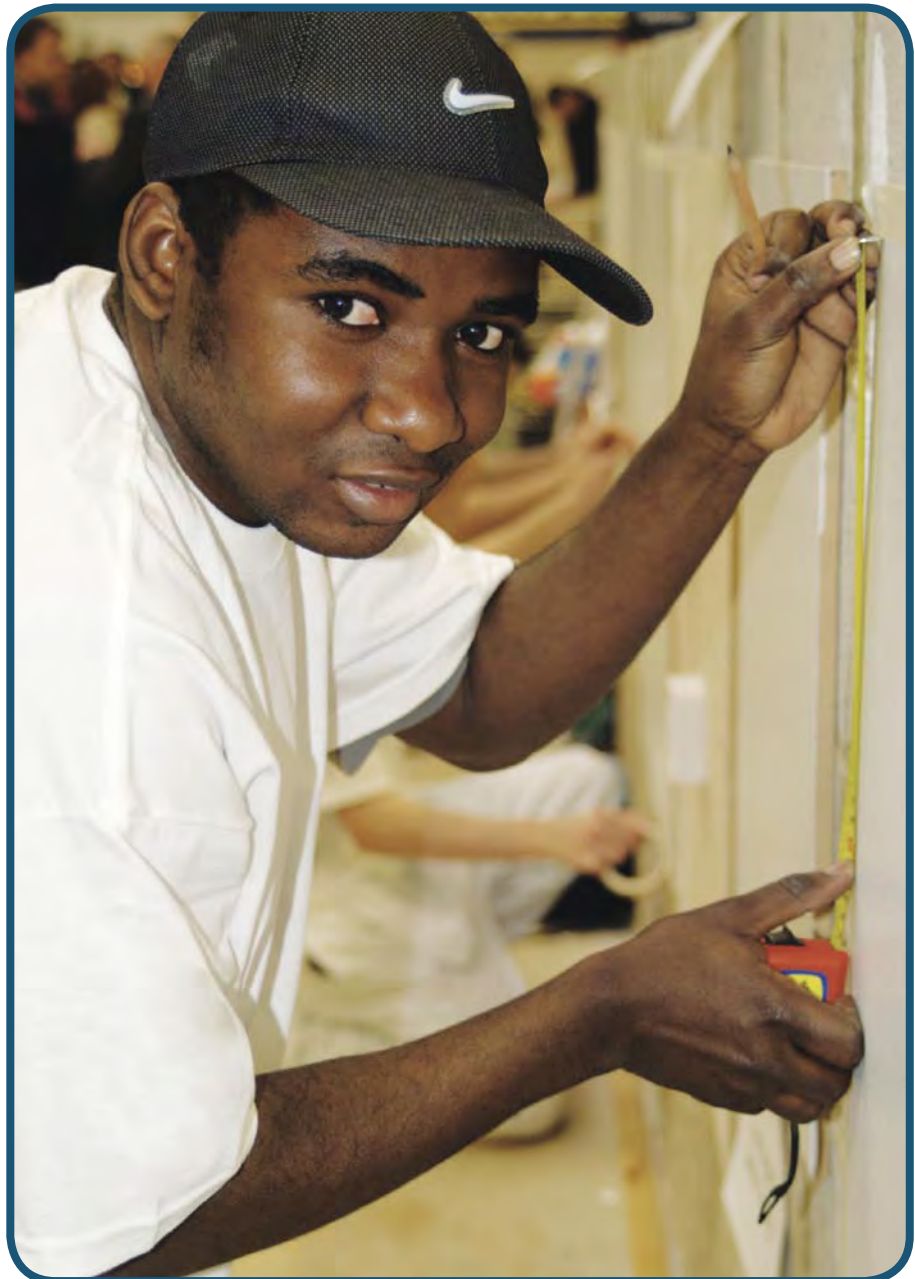
Be aware of your learners' language, literacy and Key Skills level, in particular their 'reading with understanding' level. This will influence how you group learners at tables and the reading level of materials you use in your sessions.

Readability is important because of the need to match reader and text. Poor readers will soon become discouraged by texts that are too difficult for them to read fluently, and more advanced readers will be dismissive about texts that they think are too easy. Effective learning takes place when teachers and trainers successfully match the reading level of material to the 'reading with understanding' level of the reader. You can check reading comprehension by targeted questions and answers or by using the cloze procedure or sentence completion. This involves preparing texts for learners with every  $n^{\text{th}}$  word deleted. Often,  $n = 5$ . A quick way of doing this is to cover each fifth or seventh word. If learners can predict the meaning successfully, the text is at their 'reading with understanding' level.

Legibility of text is influenced by layout, design and the way the text has been written. Good writers always assess their audience carefully and write in a way that will suit the purpose of the message. However, other factors affect understanding of what is read, in particular, the motivation of the reader, their previous knowledge of the subject, their reason for reading and the style of writing. Learners motivated by special interests or with particular

expertise may be able to read some texts at a higher level than predicted by assessment results.

The checklist on the following pages lists some features that indicate how accessible texts are to readers. Working with colleagues, use the checklist to assess the readability of your own learning material. After assessing your material, use the criteria again to improve readability by simplifying the text and then reassessing it. You will find more guidance on how to write texts that readers will find easier to read from the Basic Skills Agency and the Plain English Campaign.



## Text layout and design: assessing readability

Feature	Good practice criteria	Comment
Design	<p>Good quality paper that does not let printing show through. Many readers prefer cream or pale yellow.</p> <p>Plenty of white space around text.</p> <p>Clear font such as Arial, Comic Sans, Trebuchet, Helvetica.</p> <p>Minimum font size of 12 point.</p> <p>Line spacing (leading) of 1.5 to 2 times text size.</p> <p><i>Italic</i> text and <b>bold</b> text are difficult to read. Use sparingly and mainly for emphasis.</p> <p>Clear background and good contrast.</p> <p>Do not print over images or shading.</p> <p>Narrow columns of text are difficult to read.</p>	
Text layout and signals	<p>Headings and sub-headings with key words help understanding.</p> <p>Relevant illustrations, photographs and diagrams help understanding.</p>	

Feature	Good practice criteria	Comment
	<p>Signals in the text can help readers when used carefully and consistently. For example:</p> <p>Go signals – and, first, second, next, then, also.</p> <p>Caution signals – as a result, finally, consequently.</p> <p>Turn signals – yet, despite, otherwise, however.</p> <p>The active voice and use of personal pronouns for example, we and you) makes text easier to read.</p>	
<b>Writing style</b>	<p>Active sentences are livelier than passive sentences, for example, 'The boy ate the cake' rather than 'The cake was eaten by the boy.'</p> <p>Redundant words and phrases that do not add to the meaning are unhelpful.</p> <p>Use the simplest words that fit the meaning, for example, 'more' rather than 'in excess of'.</p>	
<b>Sentence length</b>	<p>Short, simple sentences with one idea are best.</p> <p>Aim for one or two clauses per sentence.</p> <p>Aim for sentences of 15–20 words maximum, fewer for Entry Level 3.</p>	

Feature	Good practice criteria	Comment
Vocabulary	<p>Use words that are familiar to learners but do not patronise. Use correct technical words and introduce and define them clearly.</p> <p>Repeat unfamiliar or technical words frequently.</p>	
Line breaks, paragraphing	<p>Line breaks at the end of sentences help readers.</p> <p>Try to avoid splitting paragraphs over two pages.</p> <p>Paragraphs should be short and focused on one key idea.</p>	
Capital and lower-case letters	<p>Always use capital and lower-case letters correctly.</p> <p>Text written in capital letters is difficult to read.</p> <p>Use <b>lower-case bold</b> for emphasis, not capitals.</p>	
Readability index	<p>Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score or SMOG Index or Other index (for example, FOG, Frequency of Gobbledegook)</p>	

## Readability formulae

Formulae can be used to calculate readability of text. These usually take into account the quantifiable aspects of text such as sentence and word length. Results locate a text on a scale of reading difficulty referred to as 'reading age'. This is helpful to compare one resource to another in terms of difficulty. However, it is important not to categorise learners by reading age or to use the results of readability tests in isolation, ignoring the other important factors above.

The table below shows the equivalence between national qualification, Skills for Life and National Curriculum levels. This is a helpful reference point when planning learning materials to use with individuals or groups.

## Equivalence between levels

National curriculum	Basic skills	Key skills	National qualifications
		Level 5	Level 5
		Level 4	Level 4
		Level 3	Level 3
	Level 2	Level 2	Level 2
4/5 (11 Years)	Level 1	Level 1	Level 1
3 (9 Years)	Entry 3		Entry
2 (7 Years)	Entry 2		
1 (5 Years)	Entry 1		

Source: DfES Skills for Life Strategy Unit, 2003.

If you do use readability indices you will be able to benchmark your learning materials and achieve a better match to your learners' needs. A number of teachers and trainers use readability indices routinely when preparing or selecting text materials such as handouts or textbooks. Readability formulae tend to produce different results, so if you are comparing texts you must use the same measure each time.

One readability formula, the American Flesch Reading Ease Score, is available in Microsoft Word and illustrated on the next page. To set your spellchecker to check readability automatically, go to Tools, Options, Spelling and Grammar and select the Readability option. Word will then show you the readability score when you check spellings. Add 5 to the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score to convert it to an English standard reading level.

## Shampoo and condition hair and scalp: pH scale (Level 2)

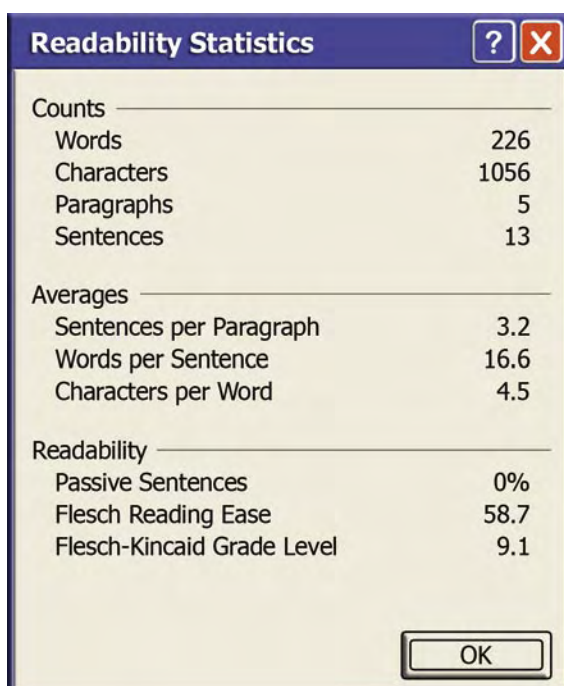
The pH scale measures **acidity and alkalinity**. It ranges from 1 to 14. Below 7 is acid and above 7 alkaline. Neutral (neither acid nor alkaline) is about 7. So the higher the number, the more alkaline, and the lower the number, the more acid.

The normal pH of hair and skin is 5.6, which is slightly acid. Many hairdressing chemicals are alkaline (to help lift the cuticle layer and allow the chemicals to penetrate the cortex) – perm lotions are an example.

When you shampoo or condition the hair, you must consider restoring the natural pH balance of the hair, particularly following chemical treatment. You can do this by

using pH balance products designed for the purpose in the form of shampoos and conditioners. Most professional products used in the salon are pH balanced but some are specially prepared treatments and you need to know about them so you can sell their benefits to your clients.

The diagram on the following page shows the pH scale in relation to hair. Alkaline products such as perm lotions, colorants and bleaches can damage the hair. To remove all traces and restore the hair's natural pH, use shampoos and conditioners that are slightly acid with a pH of 5 to 6 (the same as hair in its natural state).



Readability Statistics	
<b>Counts</b>	
Words	226
Characters	1056
Paragraphs	5
Sentences	13
<b>Averages</b>	
Sentences per Paragraph	3.2
Words per Sentence	16.6
Characters per Word	4.5
<b>Readability</b>	
Passive Sentences	0%
Flesch Reading Ease	58.7
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	9.1

The Flesch Reading Ease formula is based on the number of syllables per word and words per sentence. It gives a difficulty index with a notional score out of 100. The higher the score, the easier it is to understand the text.

It was developed to 'index' adult reading material and has been converted to an American standard 'Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level' score in MS Word. Add 5 to the answer to give the equivalent English standard reading level. In the example above, this gives an English standard readability level of approximately 14.1.

To save the Word readability dialogue box with your text:

- press Alt and Print Screen;
- click OK;
- move the insertion point to the end of your document;
- press Ctrl and V;
- save the document.

Another tool to measure readability is the Simple Measure of Gobbledegook (SMOG) formula. SMOG is widely used by teachers and trainers and is much quicker to work out by hand than other formulae.

1. Select a text.
2. Count 10 sentences.
3. Count the number of words that have three or more syllables.
4. Multiply this by 3.
5. Circle the number closest to your answer.

1	4	9	16	25	36	49	64	81	100	121	144	169
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6. Find the square root of the number you circled.

1	4	9	16	25	36	49	64	81	100	121	144	169
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13

7. Add 8. This gives you the readability level.

This calculation gives a readability level of approximately 17 for the text on the previous page.

## Using texts in context

When choosing a resource for your learners to work with, you need to think about the context in which they will use it. If it is to be shared in a group or used under teacher or trainer direction, it can be at 'instructional' level, towards the upper limit of the learners' reading capability. Learners in groups can and do help each other to understand texts, and support from the teacher or trainer means new material can be introduced and understood.

If a text is to be used by learners working alone, it must be at their 'independent' level for reading comprehension. This requires material to be significantly simpler, typically at least one level below the learner's operational level, to avoid loss of confidence and failure of comprehension.

# Supporting your learners' reading strategies

In an age when we are bombarded with information, the learner who can locate essential knowledge quickly is already ahead of the field. Learners need to know about different reading strategies and to understand which approach to use depending on reading purpose. Many learners believe that the only way to read is to start at the beginning of a text and to read to the end.

Many learners are not effective readers; they need to learn different strategies for different purposes and need to be given guided opportunities to practise. As teachers and trainers, we all use valuable reading strategies every day, often subconsciously. Teach these skills explicitly and give your learners reason to practise. The need for strategic reading skills is particularly well illustrated when using internet search engines. Depending on how concise your instructions are, you will need to skim, scan and read in depth the list of sources you are offered. This is a good opportunity for you to help learners develop these skills themselves.

Always take care to use learning materials that are within the reading capabilities of your learners. Differentiate where necessary by using materials with different readability levels, and remember that strategic reading skills need to be developed from Entry Level 3 upwards.

## Skimming

This is a method of rapid reading to absorb general meaning. We often skim as a precursor to a more detailed search for specific information and this method is mostly used for non-fiction texts. Skimming means allowing the eye to move rapidly across each line, ignoring punctuation or small words (in, the, and) but allowing the eye to linger over, and take in, larger key words and phrases related to the theme of the text.

### Good skimmers:

- speak key words and phrases aloud as they encounter them in the text;
- develop a feel for the tone and atmosphere of a piece of writing.

## Scanning

### Useful teaching strategies include:

- demonstration of skimming on a page of newspaper containing different articles or on a search engine on the web. Ask learners to find a specific topic. Point out that headlines, subheadings, bold text and photographs help understanding.
- using an unfamiliar textbook or web page. Get learners to find key facts by:
  - checking the contents page for specific headings/chapters;
  - using the index;
  - checking chapter summaries.

The purpose of scanning a text is to locate a specific detail such as a key idea, word, date, time. Like skimming, it involves rapid movement of the eye across the page, skipping most of the text but keeping the specific detail that is required at the conscious level.

### Good scanners:

- repeat the required word or phrase aloud (or silently) while searching;
- look for key information or indicators, for example:
  - capital letters to indicate names;
  - numbers if searching for a date;
  - check subheadings for clues.
- recognise key words in the task and look for where they are repeated;
- use visual clues and colour-match symbols when scanning for signs.

### Useful teaching strategies include:

- quick 5-minute exercises. Give a short text containing a mix of statistics, facts and opinions on a given theme. Allow 2 minutes reading time to highlight or underline in colour:
  - all the statistics;
  - all the key words relating to the theme;
  - the answer to one specific question, for example, 'What are the four different types of fire extinguisher?'

## Careful reading in depth

At this point, the reader has located the information needed and is ready to read carefully for understanding.

### Good careful readers:

- identify the main idea in the text;
- ask themselves questions, for example:
  - What do I know about this already?
  - What do I need to know?
  - What is the author's purpose?
  - Is it fact or opinion?
  - Does this fit in with my ideas?
  - Do I agree or disagree?
- reflect on what they have read and 'recite' or 'rehearse' the new knowledge or information, relating it to what they already know.

### Useful teaching strategies include:

- remind learners of something they already know. Then provide a text or web page and ask them to find information which relates to or extends their knowledge in a particular way, for example, how to apply knowledge of type of fire extinguisher to scenarios for particular types of fire.



# Supporting your learners with vocabulary and spelling

## Vocabulary

How technical is the vocabulary in your occupational area?

- Does it include conceptual terms, for example, expansion, equivalent, composition?
- Is there a subject-specific vocabulary, which has a different meaning in normal use, for example, bed, skirt, cost, benefit?
- Do you use common words that are often misspelt, for example, business, necessary?

You may find it helpful to work on vocabulary at three levels:

- 1 Slightly unusual words in a standard sense, for example, development, examine, relations. These may not be part of the average learner's daily conversation. Glossaries do not include them; teachers and trainers often do not explain them.
- 2 Common words used in a special sense, for example, balance, contemporary, horizontal, rotate. These need explanation as special problems may arise if the meaning changes from subject to subject, for example, 'volume' in music, maths, art and in the library.
- 3 Technical terms, often particular to the subject, for example, duct, chamfer, taper, shank, torque, medication, ericaceous, hydraulic.

To understand a new word properly and use it with confidence, a learner must use it repeatedly, in the same way that we learn a foreign language. Build in plenty of oral and written repetition. Make sure your learners build and use their own Technical Glossary. Pilot centres found this a valuable tool and one that is accepted and appreciated by everyone working in a technical environment.

### QUOTE

The Technical Glossary has been introduced and is working well. An excellent ongoing tool!

Aimee Sykes, YMCA Training, Welwyn Garden City

## Spelling

Spelling is a multisensory skill and everyone has preferred ways of learning to spell. It is helpful to talk about different strategies with your learners and the introduction to the Learner workbook has some ideas. If learners can be helped to use their existing strategies more effectively and widen their range of approaches, they can become better spellers.

These pointers may help you introduce new vocabulary to learners in a way which helps them understand and remember:

- 1 Introduce a new word as near as possible to its point of use.
- 2 Do this systematically to build up a methodical subject vocabulary.
- 3 Say a new word clearly – pronunciation is an important memory aid.
- 4 Write a new word clearly on the board. Use capital and lower-case letters correctly. Do not write in capital letters as they are difficult to read.
- 5 Learners must talk about a word, see it, use it and write it repeatedly to learn it. Spelling is a tactile, auditory and visual skill.
- 6 Encourage learners to make and use a Technical Glossary to record spellings and meanings.
- 7 Provide opportunities to use vocabulary frequently.
- 8 Test and correct spellings.