helping learners to improve their basic skills

Literacy, numeracy and language

What?

- identify what help is needed
- screening and initial assessment
- support learners
- training for staff
- check improvements.

Why?

Some people need to improve their basic skills in literacy, numeracy and English, if it's not their first language. It's important that the basic skills needs of learners are identified early and appropriate support provided.

Key facts

- Four out of ten 14 year olds in England don't reach the level expected of them in literacy and numeracy.
- Around 50% of 16 year olds in England don't get GCSE grades A-C in maths and around 40% don't get these grades in English.
- Seven million adults in the UK don't have the literacy or numeracy expected of an 11 year old – though many of them only need a little help to improve.
- Low levels of basic skills in the workforce cost a typical business with 50 employees £165,000 a year.
- For individuals, basic skills are a springboard to better jobs.

Basic skills are the skills needed to function effectively in life. Good basic skills are an essential underpinning of good performance at work. They are also one of the foundations of good learning. Learners who don't get help to tackle basic skills needs:

- are slower at picking up job-related skills than other learners
- are less likely to finish their training and more likely to leave early
- don't get on as well in the workplace.

That's why basic skills are a focus of inspection in work-based learning. The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) looks at the quality of support learners are receiving to help them improve their literacy, numeracy and English language skills, in the context of their main learning programme. Where programmes include key skills – all Modern Apprenticeships (MA) – inspectors evaluate the quality of the support learners are getting in literacy, numeracy and/or English as a second or other language (ESOL).
Specifically, inspection focuses on four main areas:

- The quality of initial assessment – how well learners’ key skills, literacy, numeracy and language needs have been identified.
- Planning of learning – whether learners have an appropriate learning programme to meet their needs.
- The quality of support provided and its outcomes (the benefits learners receive in improving their levels of skills).
- How well the support is resourced, led and managed.

*Inspection will for the first time give an accurate picture of the extent and quality of basic skills provision, especially for those who need to improve their skills in literacy, numeracy and language to achieve their main learning goals and progress in work and other learning opportunities.*

There are national standards for adult literacy, adult numeracy and English as a second or other language (ESOL). The national standards at levels 1 and 2 are comparable to the key skills of communication and application of number, also at levels 1 and 2. There are also entry standards in literacy and numeracy that help people progress to level 1 and beyond. The standards are linked to core curricula, designed to support teachers and trainers who work with learners on their basic skills. All are available from the DfES website www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus.

How?

**Identify what help is needed**

This is done by screening learners and carrying out some form of initial assessment. Screening means finding out whether or not someone might have a literacy, language or numeracy need. Initial assessment goes a bit further and helps to identify their level of skills. Where learners fall below level 1 in initial assessment, they may be entitled to receive extra funding to support their additional learning needs.

It’s important to recognise that an individual learner may have different levels of reading, writing, numeracy and language skill. Everyone has a ‘spiky profile’ in basic skills – they do some things better than others. That’s why it’s essential to identify early on:

- what level of literacy, numeracy and language (if relevant) learners have when they start their programmes
- which specific skills in relation to the national standards individual learners need to improve
- where they are likely to need most support.

Some learners may already have been assessed when they start on an apprenticeship, e.g. by Connexions. Where this is the case, it will not normally be necessary to repeat the screening, unless there are specific grounds for doing so, e.g. the learner requests it, or the screening was carried out some time ago. If learners have not already been assessed, the assessment should be carried out as soon as possible.

The results from an initial assessment should be recorded and used to inform the learner’s individual learning plan (ILP). The ILP format approved by the Learning and Skills Council has sections in which to record:

- the results of initial assessment in basic skills
- a broad outline of what a learner needs to improve.

It is essential that these sections of the ILP are completed fully for each individual.
Screening and initial assessment

The Basic Skills Agency (BSA) ‘Fast Track’ is a screening test that takes just 10 minutes and can be used as part of a 1:1 interview. A training manager says:

“We use ‘Fast Track’ with all our recruits who don’t have GCSE level C in English and Maths. If we think they have a literacy and numeracy need, as a result of the test, we then use the initial assessment tests to tell us what their needs are likely to be.”

It may not be necessary to screen all learners for their basic skills. For example, learners with GCSE grades A*-C in English and Maths are unlikely to fall below level 1 in a screening test.

BSA has an initial assessment pack that gives an indication of learners' literacy and numeracy skills at entry 1-3 and level 1. There are two tests, one for literacy and one for numeracy. They consist of multiple choice and open response questions and take about 20 minutes each.

BSA has also produced a suite of diagnostic assessment materials. They are mapped to the national standards, the core curricula for adult literacy and numeracy, pre-entry curricula and the ESOL curriculum, and cover pre-entry to level 2. Training is available in the use of the materials via the BSA regional organiser.

Several commercial sets of materials are also available, in print or software forms. Some integrate initial assessment and learning support in a single tool. Results should map clearly to the adult literacy and numeracy standards and core curricula.

Support learners

Results from initial assessment should be used to develop learning plans to tackle specific skills. These plans are more detailed than the broad outlines on the individual learning plan (ILP). They should be linked to specific skills in the key skills units or the adult literacy and numeracy standards. Links should also be made where appropriate to the relevant core curricula. Learners may have a series of plans, which provide a record of the support learners have received and the progress they have made towards their learning goals. Copies of all plans should be kept in learners’ files.

Two things are needed to support learners effectively:

- tutors or trainers who know what to do and feel confident about helping learners
- resources they can use with learners – and resources learners can use for themselves.

The availability of staff with sufficient expertise to help learners is the cornerstone of effective support. This does not mean that all staff must have specialist qualifications, although it is helpful if some do – it’s good to have someone available to work with learners who is trained and qualified in basic skills teaching. Vocational tutors and others can also play a significant part in supporting learners on a day-to-day basis. Where they are unable to provide the breadth or depth of support some learners may need, specialist staff should be available.

Learning materials are a second main source of support. There is a wide range of published learning materials for basic skills. New learning materials and teaching guides are being produced as part of the government’s ‘Skills for Life’ programme. Learners can also access online materials through learndirect once registered with a centre. Some commercially available software contains tutorials and exercises to build learners’ skills and confidence.

Other resources are available through Avanti Books (see the ‘Resources’ section of this factsheet). The Institute of Education in London has a comprehensive library of basic skills resources.
**Training for staff**

Training in the core curricula for adult literacy, numeracy and English as a second or other language (ESOL) is available for teachers teaching adult literacy and numeracy for more than two hours a week. It is not a qualification for basic skills teaching in itself. The Basic Skills Agency is making the training materials available to providers that use experienced core curriculum trainers.

Training is also available for vocational and basic skills tutors who teach or support literacy and numeracy for more than 2 hours per week. Three-day courses are being organised by the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) and can be booked from their website (see ‘Resources’).

Qualifications are available for people who want to become specialist literacy, numeracy or ESOL teachers. The qualifications are at level 4. Several higher education institutions have developed courses, and some awarding bodies (City & Guilds, OCR) have developed qualification routes. Qualifications are also available at level 3 for support teachers (i.e. those supporting specialist teachers).

**Check improvements**

It’s important to know whether learners are getting better in their basic skills. The core curricula for adult literacy and numeracy contain hundreds of activities that can be used to help learners develop their skills. Many of them can also be used to check learners’ progress. Many other learning resources also contain tests or exercises to check skills and understanding.

The golden rule is: little and often. Check one thing at a time. Give feedback straightaway – starting with the positive. And always try to give learners the sense that they are getting on.

The benefits gained by learners from receiving good support in key skills, literacy, numeracy and language can be measured and recorded in four main ways:

- Qualifications obtained – the key skills qualifications/units and/or the adult literacy and numeracy qualifications.
- Progress made towards qualifications – measured in relation to the unit specifications and (in the case of literacy, numeracy and ESOL) to the core curricula.
- Main programme qualifications – learners who might have failed to gain or make progress towards these qualifications without key/basic skills support.
- Learner satisfaction – how learners themselves assess the quality of the support they received.

**Where and when?**

There are no rules about where and when. Employers and providers should do the best they can to help learners at the time and place that suits them best. This includes:

- providing 1:1 coaching in the workplace
- organising workshops or ‘drop-in’ sessions on specific topics
- giving learners access to computers and some of the good software that’s around for basic skills
- allowing specific time off for study through local specialist providers, such as local authority adult education or further education colleges.
Case studies and examples

Providing support
There are lots of ways to help learners with basic skills needs. Here’s what some employers are already doing:

- Basic skills training is available to anyone who needs it. Learners get one-to-one tuition in the workplace from a specialist tutor, or they can take time off to go to weekly drop-in sessions at a local college.
- Intensive basic skills programmes are put on, lasting 10 full days over three weeks. Learners who need extra help also get one-to-one tuition.
- A learning centre has been set up where basic skills are taught by a part-time tutor. Short, intensive courses in specific aspects of literacy, numeracy and language are available online at the centre.
- Learners who’ve got basic skills needs get four hours off work each week for training.

Building staff skills
One national provider that works closely with employers in a specific sector has included the following actions in its post-inspection action plan to develop the skills and expertise of staff.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Expected outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Two trainers from each area to attend 3-day core curriculum training.</td>
<td>6 members of staff trained in the latest guidance on supporting learners with basic skills needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. One-day staff training workshop to disseminate outcomes of core curriculum training.</td>
<td>All staff aware of the guidance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Identify two trainers to be trained as specialists, one for literacy and the other for numeracy; register these trainers for level 3 courses.</td>
<td>2 members of staff able to provide specialist support to learners and advise other trainers.</td>
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The training manager explains:

“I was annoyed when the inspectors pulled us up for not giving learners enough basic skills support. To be honest, I didn’t think it was our job. When we looked at why some of our slower learners were struggling, though, we started to realise that it was actually a problem and we have to do something about it, like it or not.

I investigated some options and talked to the regional Skills for Life coordinator. She told me about the core curriculum training and we got six of our trainers on it. They’re about to run a workshop for the rest of the staff – apparently it was a really useful three days, so we’re looking forward to hearing more.

Now I’ve got to find two volunteers to do the specialist training, which is much more of a commitment.”
Resources

- ALI (2002) Guidance for providers on the inspection of literacy, numeracy and ESOL (Basic Skills Agency)
- CBI (2002) Tackling low skills: finding the right approach
- DfES (2002) Adult numeracy core curriculum
- DfES (2002) Adult literacy core curriculum
- Payne, J (2002) Basic skills in the workplace: a research review (LSDA)
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2001) National standards for adult literacy and numeracy

Stay in touch

- www.avantibooks.com
- www.bbc.co.uk/skillwise
- www.basic-skills.co.uk
- www.learndirect.co.uk
- www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus

Checklist

- How do you find out whether a learner needs to improve their basic skills?
- How do you find out what they need help with?
- What resources are used for screening and initial assessment?

- How do you know whether learners are getting the help as planned?
- How do you know whether their skills are improving?

- Does your organisation have a written strategy, backed up by a policy and procedures for basic skills?
- Do people understand and implement the procedures?
- If subcontractors are used to help deliver basic skills, how is the quality of their work monitored and evaluated?

- Has anyone in the organisation got qualifications to teach basic skills?
- Have staff been trained, e.g. in the core curriculum?
- Are there enough resources for teaching and learning basic skills?

- What information is gathered about learners’ achievements in basic skills?
- What does the information tell you?
- How is it used to improve things?

- How is the quality of basic skills teaching and learning assessed, e.g. through observation?
- How do you make sure that all learners get the help they need?
- Is the delivery of basic skills linked to other elements of learners’ programmes?