

Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada



Highlights from the Canadian Report

Reading the Future, the Canadian report on the findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), provides a portrait of Canadian literacy that adds greatly to the understanding of the benefits and consequences of literacy in our society. The report shows that complex social and economic forces influence literacy. The IALS data indicate that individual choice and supportive actions by employers and governments can shape some of these forces.

The concept of “literacy” has evolved. Literacy now means more than the basic ability to read and write. Literacy skill levels now also reflect a person’s ability to understand and use information, a key function in a world where daily living requires higher communication and information processing skills. This report details results on three scales (prose, document and qualitative literacy) along a continuum of skills from 1 (lowest) to 4/5 (highest).

Simply stated, literacy is important. Society rewards individuals who are proficient and penalizes those who are not, whether expressed in terms of employment opportunities and job success or active social, cultural and citizenship participation in society. Literacy is also important to nations, as these skills are building blocks. They enable the creation of a labour force capable of competing in a changing world—a key step to economic growth and improvement of the human condition. They are also the cornerstones of democracy and of the exchange of knowledge and information.

What follows are some principal findings of the Canadian Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS).

A Canadian profile

The fundamental story of literacy in Canada remains the same as it was five years ago: significant numbers of adult Canadians have low-level literacy skills that constrain their participation in society and in the economy.



Comparisons of the distribution of literacy on the three IALS scales with that on the single LSUDA reading scale, Canadian adults aged 16 to 69

Scale	IALS levels			
	1	2	3	4/5
	%			
Prose	18	26	35	22
Document	19	25	32	24
Quantitative	18	26	34	22

LSUDA	LSUDA levels			4
	1	2	3	
	%			
LSUDA	7	9	22	62

As the table above shows, IALS Level 1 includes LSUDA Levels 1 and 2. IALS Level 2 is equivalent to LSUDA 3; and IALS Levels 3, 4 and 5 divides LSUDA Level 4 into three separate levels.

Note also that the above table provides figures for adults aged 16 to 69, while the table on page 3 provides figures for adults 16 and over (i.e. including adults beyond the age of 69).

At the broadest level, literacy profiles in Canada have shown little change over the past five years. This belies earlier predictions of a continuing erosion of literacy skills in Canada. At the same time, given that a new group of students known to have strong literacy skills graduated in the intervening period, some improvements might have been expected.

In fact, the latest group of graduates are generally much better educated and more literate than older age groups. But the International Adult Literacy Survey detected no appreciable overall improvement. This suggests that other factors are affecting the literacy skills of working Canadians, and points to the need for further research.

Clearly, literacy continues to be an issue of importance to Canadians. The table on page 3 shows that

- about 22% of adult Canadians 16 years and over fall in the lowest level of literacy. They have serious difficulty dealing with printed materials and most likely identify themselves as people who have difficulties reading; and
- another 24-26% fall in the second lowest level. Such people can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out, and material in which the tasks involved are not too complex. They read, but not well.

Literacy from province to province

The distribution of literacy skills on three scales by region and selected provinces of Canada, adults aged 16 and over

	Prose scale			
	Level			
	1	2	3	4/5
	%			
Canada	22	26	33	20
Atlantic provinces ¹	25	26	35	15
New Brunswick	28	31	25	16
Quebec	28	26	39	8
Ontario	19	28	28	25
Western provinces ²	18	24	34	25
Alberta	15	21	36	29
British Columbia	19	24	35	22
	%			
Canada	23	24	30	22
Atlantic provinces ¹	28	26	32	14
New Brunswick	29	30	24	16
Quebec	31	27	29	13
Ontario	21	22	31	26
Western provinces ²	19	25	29	27
Alberta	16	21	33	30
British Columbia	20	29	27	25
	%			
Canada	22	26	32	20
Atlantic provinces ¹	23	30	30	16
New Brunswick	25	34	27	14
Quebec	28	32	30	10
Ontario	20	23	34	23
Western provinces ²	18	24	33	25
Alberta	13	22	38	27
British Columbia	21	23	34	23

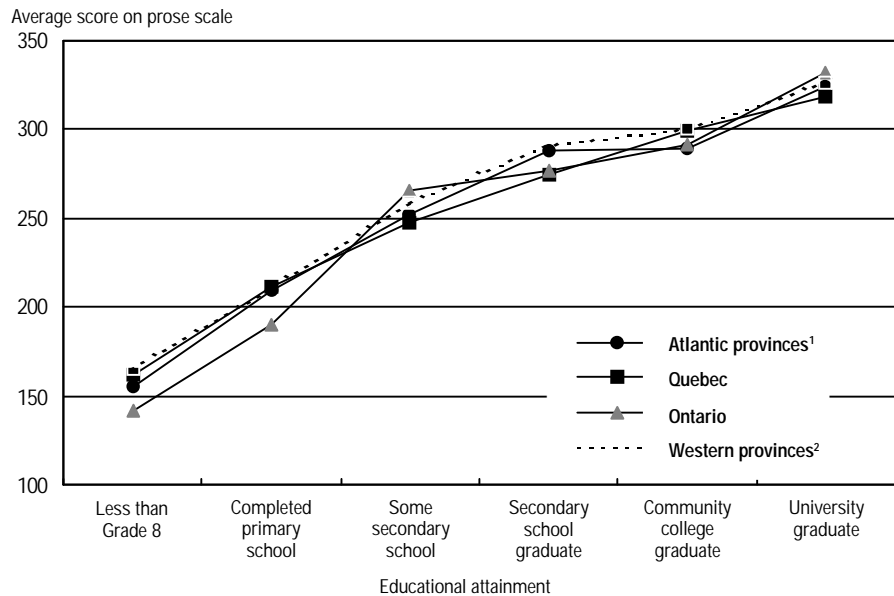
1. New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

2. Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

There is considerable variation in Canadians' literacy skills and that variation differs by region. Generally, there are larger numbers of adults with high skill levels in the western provinces and large numbers with low skills in the east.

The regional differences in levels of literacy skills across Canada are consistent with other characteristics associated with literacy. For example, educational attainment differs greatly from region to region, and literacy levels follow a similar pattern.

Average prose score by educational attainment for each region of Canada, adults aged 16 and over



1. New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.
2. Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

Highest level of educational attainment	Typical literacy pattern
No secondary education	Most at Level 1, particularly those who have not completed primary school; only very few individuals at Level 4/5.
Some secondary school	Largest number at Level 2; representation at Levels 1 and 3.
Secondary school graduate	Largest number at Level 3; second largest at Level 2.
Community college graduate	Largest number at Level 3; second largest at Level 4/5.
University graduate	Largest number at Level 4/5; a handful of individuals at Level 1.

About 18% of those aged 16 and over in the Atlantic region and 21% of those in Québec have less than Grade 8 education, but only 12% of Ontarians and 11% of those in the western provinces have the same level of education. However, when comparisons are made within levels of educational attainment, the differences among the regions are greatly reduced. In other words, a person in Nova Scotia with a post-secondary education is just as likely to perform at a high level as a person with a similar education in British Columbia.

The education connection

The Canadian results reveal a clear relationship between educational attainment and literacy levels. Most adults with no secondary education are at Level 1. Among those with some secondary education, most are at Level 2. The largest number of adults who hold a high school diploma perform at Level 3 or lower. Adults who took an academic program have stronger literacy skills than those who chose the vocational route. Of those who completed community college, most have Level 3 or higher while most adults with a university degree have Level 4/5. Among most recent school leavers, there are few individuals at Level 1, with most at Levels 2 and 3, a finding which belies any notion of widespread school failure.

Yet the connection between educational attainment and literacy levels, while strong, is not exclusive. Many individuals — one third of the population in fact — do not fit the general pattern.

Surprisingly, one third of Canadians who have not completed secondary school reach Level 3 or higher while a quarter or more of those who have completed a community college program are at the lower levels (1 or 2). In all, the literacy levels of about 20% of the Canadian sample in IALS are lower than the model one would predict, and about 16% are higher. Clearly, education does not “fix” a person’s literacy skills for a lifetime.

Analysis of the literacy skills of persons aged 20 years or less shows that those who are still in high school outperform those who have left school without a diploma. This suggests that school leavers’ low literacy levels may have contributed to their decision to leave school before graduation; therefore literacy may be a determinant of educational attainment as well as a consequence of it.

Those who leave school without a diploma do poorly on the quantitative scale. Results from IALS show that high scores on this scale tend to be associated with individual economic success. Programs targeted to school leavers, which focus on numeracy skills, may help to protect their economic future.

In Canada, there are consistent distribution patterns of literacy by education across the three scales. However, this is not the case in some other countries such as Germany. The report shows that, of those respondents with low education, a higher proportion of Canadians than Germans perform at Level 1 on the document and quantitative scales. It is possible that this difference is due to Germany’s system of secondary vocational education which emphasizes work experience. IALS results suggest that document and quantitative skills are particularly important to success in the workplace. If this is the case, then young Canadian adults may be less well prepared for work than their German counterparts. This lends support to policies aimed at increasing Canadian secondary students’ work experience through co-op programs, apprenticeships and other school-to-work arrangements.

Literacy and “alphabétisme”

The survey asked respondents to identify their mother tongue and gave them the choice of taking the literacy test in either English or French. Only 72% of the respondents who said their mother tongue was French (francophones) took the test in French; most of those whose first language was French, but who took the test in English, lived outside Québec or New Brunswick.

Nearly all francophones in Québec and 85% of francophones in New Brunswick chose to be tested in French. On the other hand, only about half the francophones in Ontario and a very small minority of francophones in the other provinces asked to do the test in French. In contrast, 99% of those who said their mother tongue was English took the test in English. This reflects a multitude of factors including

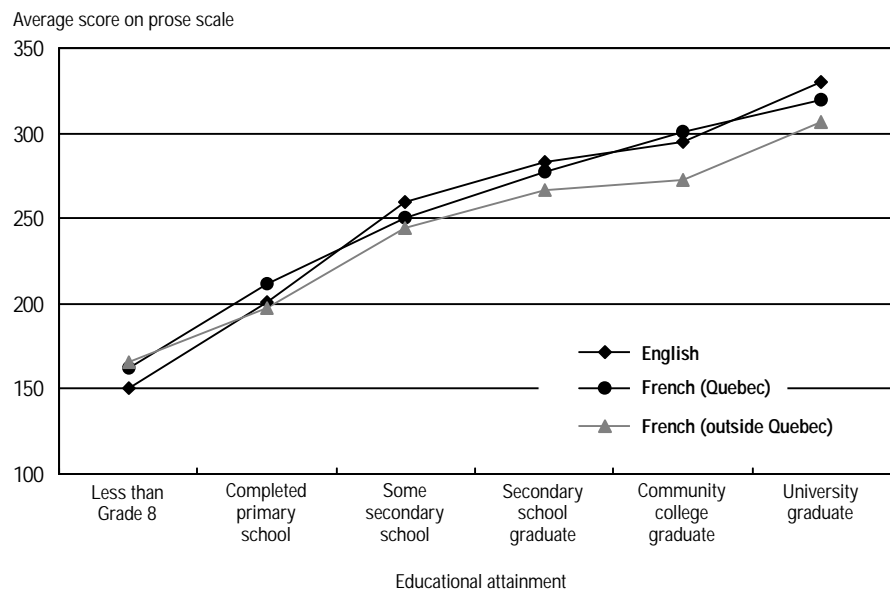
differences in concentrations of francophone populations, the proportion of fluently bilingual test-takers, the effects of language of work and access to education.

For example, due to the historical differences in access to education, particularly at the secondary level, there is a marked disparity in educational attainment between francophones and anglophones. This disparity is also reflected in the literacy levels. A larger proportion of francophones than anglophones are at Levels 1 and 2, while a larger proportion of anglophones than francophones are at Levels 3 and 4/5. However, when educational differences are taken into account, the disparity between the language groups disappears (a francophone with a university education has skills just as strong as an anglophone with a similar education) and the patterns of interlanguage comparison no longer systematically favour one group over the other. This signals that education access, attainment and quality are the main forces driving these literacy differences.

Young Quebeckers (both English and French) have a significant majority performing at Level 3 on the prose and quantitative scales. This is a significant development which demonstrates the effects of increased access to education in one's mother tongue.

The skill levels of francophones outside Québec on the document and quantitative scales are largely equivalent to those of francophones in Québec. On the prose scale, a higher proportion of francophones living in Québec are at Level 4/5 than those living outside Québec, where the scores are generally lower.

Average prose score by educational attainment for language groups in Canada, adults aged 16 and over



Policy in action: new-language literacy amongst immigrants

The international study, released in December 1995, found that in all IALS countries a significantly larger proportion of immigrants have Level 1 literacy skills in their new country's language than the non-immigrant population. This holds true in Canada. On the other hand, a significantly smaller proportion of immigrants than native-born citizens had Level 4/5 literacy — except in Canada. In Canada, the proportion of immigrants with Level 4/5 skills in English or French was higher than the proportion of non-immigrant Canadians.

This result, which sets Canada apart from all the other countries that participated in the survey, is thought to reflect Canada’s longstanding immigration policies which welcome both business-class immigrants, likely to have excellent education and literacy skills in English or French, and refugees and family-class immigrants, less likely to be skilled in one of Canada’s official languages.

Literacy from generation to generation

There is a marked difference in literacy between those who were educated primarily after World War II and those whose education was completed before that period. This disparity can be explained, in large part, by significant differences in educational attainment.

Distribution of literacy by age across the three scales, Canadian adults aged 16 and over

Age group	Prose scale Level			
	1	2	3	4/5
	%			
16 to 25	11	26	44	20
26 to 35	12	29	33	26
36 to 45	13	19	37	31
46 to 55	21	30	31	18
56 to 65	38	26	28	8
Over 65	53	27	19	...

Age group	Document scale Level			
	1	2	3	4/5
	%			
16 to 25	10	22	36	31
26 to 35	14	25	34	28
36 to 45	14	22	37	27
46 to 55	23	31	24	22
56 to 65	44	24	24	...
Over 65	58	22	18	...

Age group	Quantitative scale Level			
	1	2	3	4/5
	%			
16 to 25	10	29	45	17
26 to 35	12	26	35	28
36 to 45	12	22	36	30
46 to 55	24	32	25	19
56 to 65	40	22	31	7
Over 65	53	27	16	...

... Sample size too small to produce reliable estimates.

- 40% of Canadians over the age of 65 years have not completed primary school, compared with only 4% of Canadians aged 26 to 35 years. Similarly, 13% of Canadians aged 56 to 65 years have attended university, compared to 28% for those aged 36 to 45. However, even when educational differences are taken into account, there is still a small deterioration in skill with age.

Still, the number of seniors with weak literacy skills is significant: in Canada, there are more than 1.6 million people aged over 65 years who perform at Level 1 literacy. This means a large portion of the population is restricted in daily activities and often dependent on others for help. Poor literacy skills may lower seniors’ quality of life and increase their health and safety risks, both of which have high human and social-services costs.

Literacy skills vary by occupation

The IALS findings make it clear that it is inadvisable to set a single standard of literacy for Canada. Any society can accommodate a range of literacy levels. Literacy skill requirements and performance vary significantly by occupations and industries; some occupations need high level skills and others reflect requirements for intermediate and even basic skills. For example, clerical workers appear to function well when they tested in the middle range of the literacy scale. Professionals, on the other hand, need the higher levels required to be “literate” at their jobs.

A comparison of high-demand occupations to those in decline indicates that Canadian workers in future will require high literacy skills. Industries that have experienced growth are the ones whose employees have relatively high levels of skills; those industries in decline are characterized by workers with lower skills.

Literacy must be viewed as a cause and a consequence of employment success. The workplace affords the individual an opportunity to practice literacy. Thus, an inability to find regular employment may result in the decline of a person’s skill level.

Literacy and unemployment

An unemployed person is about three times as likely to be at Level 1 compared to someone who is employed. Data from the survey also show that the higher the literacy level, the less likely an individual is to be unemployed. As well, workers with higher skills are employed more weeks during the year than those with lower skills. Data from the survey show that in Canada, there appears to be a large income penalty for those with weaker skills, and conversely a large income bonus for those workers with high skills. A broader awareness of these income differentials would alert Canadians to the benefits of having higher literacy skills.

Literacy and the need for social support

Canadian respondents to IALS were asked if they received income either through unemployment insurance or social assistance. It was found that those who receive such income support have lower literacy levels than those who do not. The social assistance recipients have markedly lower skills than unemployment insurance beneficiaries or the general population. Once again, differences in educational attainment go a long way to explaining social assistance recipients’ lower scores: 60% of this group have not completed secondary school, compared with 28% of the unemployment insurance recipients and 29% of those receiving no income support. In fact, there are only minor differences in education between Canadians receiving unemployment insurance benefits and those receiving no income support. The slightly lower scores of the unemployment insurance group may be related to fewer opportunities for literacy practice because they are not in the workforce and their tendency to have been in occupations with lower literacy demands.

The IALS data offer ample evidence that literacy programs for individuals receiving income support would meet a significant need as employment growth in occurring occupations and industries with higher skill demands. Without literacy skill training, unemployment insurance and social assistance beneficiaries will find it increasingly difficult to return to or enter the workforce.

Literacy every day

IALS concludes that literacy skills are required every day—and daily practice of reading, writing, and calculating sustains and enhances them. Consequently,

Canadians' literacy activities at work, at home, and in the community are critical in determining the population's literacy levels. The survey measured these and found that, in most cases, the workplace is richer than the home in terms of opportunities for reading.

At home, most Canadians read a newspaper at least once a week. The higher his or her literacy level, the more likely an individual is to have reading materials at home. But this doesn't mean that reading materials are absent from the homes of those with the weakest skills: almost 50% have some books at home and almost all have a dictionary. This reinforces the crucial observation that Level 1 skills does not mean the absence of literacy, but a lower level of it

Adults with lower literacy skills are more likely to spend two hours or more watching television every day. It is tempting to interpret television-watching as a *cause* of lower literacy skills, but it is just as plausible to argue that lower skills *lead to* more viewing time. Those with low skills may not be able to get the information they need from print, simply because of their low skills, and may turn to television instead.

Whether literacy skills are practised in or out of the workplace, individuals with higher literacy skills engage in literacy-related activities more frequently and in greater depth. What is emerging is a pattern, a circle of literacy that is common to literacy practice, training and education: skills contribute to practice by allowing individuals to succeed in situations where opportunities for practice are possible.

Self-assessment of literacy skills

The survey results show that only a minority of those persons with weak literacy skills, whether at work or at home, recognize a need to improve their levels. While it may seem that individuals at lower levels are overrating their skills, this may not be the case. Individuals were asked to relate their literacy skills to their job demands and IALS data show that for some individuals these demands are low. Therefore, in these situations even low skills would be satisfactory. Nevertheless, if only a minority with low skills see any need to improve their skills, that could become a concern for public policy. Without awareness of the need to improve, few Canadians will actively seek opportunities and ways to enhance their skills.

Conclusion

Literacy is central to the well-being of both individuals and nations. The data contained in IALS will permit policy makers to continue building on our strengths and, more importantly, will allow them to concentrate resources in areas that may be amenable to intervention by individuals, employers and governments.

While there has been little change in the literacy profiles in Canada in the past five years, new graduates from Canadian secondary schools since 1989 are generally more literate than the older cohorts ahead of them. However, the report also shows that literacy skills are the product of complex social and economic forces which go beyond the simple linkage with the educational system. The development, maintenance and improvement of literacy skills are strongly linked to usage. Literacy is not a skill which is learned in school and then remains consistent over the course of a lifetime. Practice contributes to skill both through more frequent use of the skill and through greater variety by providing opportunities to use and to expand the skill in new situations. At the same time, skill contributes to practice by allowing individuals to enter and succeed in situations where opportunities for practice are possible.

The IALS model provides an important framework which can help shape the public discourse about literacy. No longer can we speak about literates versus illiterates — or haves and have nots. We can now speak about levels of literacy with each level capable of supporting a broad spectrum of analysis. In fact, IALS recognizes that everyone has some level of literacy skill and proficiency. Even Level 1 is not an absence of literacy skills but is merely a lower level of skill.

If people don't use literacy skills after they have left school or college, they can lose them. The reverse is also true: if they practise literacy or receive training, people can gain skills. These findings reveal the importance of understanding how skill is lost or enhanced as well as the need for policies to encourage, protect and nurture literacy outside the formal education system.

In the end IALS demonstrates that literacy is important socially, culturally, in terms of citizenship, and economically; it rewards those who are proficient and penalizes those who are not. This fact is critical to the success of Canadians and of Canada as a nation.