

## **Adult Literacy Supplemental Assessment**

### **What is the Adult Literacy Supplemental Assessment (ALSA)?**

ALSA is a component of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) that provides, for the first time, much-needed information about the literacy strengths and weaknesses of the least-literate adults—those whose literacy level would prevent them from completing the “main NAAL.” ALSA measures basic, word-level literacy skills, whereas the main NAAL assesses task-based literacy performance (i.e., how well respondents perform everyday tasks such as balancing a checkbook). NAAL participants with very low performance on seven core screening items are given ALSA instead of the main NAAL.

### **Why is ALSA needed?**

The NAAL forerunner, the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), provided little information about the literacy skills and weaknesses of the least-literate adults, because these respondents were unable to complete the assessment. Yet these individuals have varying literacy abilities that need to be identified, assessed, and augmented. This need is underscored by the expectation that the numbers of adults likely to be at the lower literacy levels, such as Hispanics, immigrants, and the elderly, will continue to grow.

By collecting information about—and increasing our understanding of—the basic reading skills and deficits of the least-literate adults, ALSA can help policymakers and stakeholders to develop more effective literacy services for these individuals. Improved literacy services may help narrow the literacy gap between low- and high-performing adults. Educators, policymakers, and others can also use this previously unavailable literacy information to develop programs and materials that aid the least-literate Americans in such areas as employment, health, and civic participation.

### **What are the key features of ALSA?**

- ALSA is administered to the least-literate adults only (about 3-5 percent of all NAAL participants in 2003—those who would be able to answer few, if any, of the main NAAL items).
- ALSA assesses participants’ ability to identify letters, numbers, and words and to comprehend simple prose and documents with the aid of nonlinguistic materials (e.g., logos and pictures) and familiar, tangible materials (e.g., food boxes and drug labels).
- Oral directions and questions are provided in English or Spanish and oral answers may be given in either language, but the material to be read is in English.
- Oral answers are scored on the spot by interviewers trained to apply standardized procedures and avoid bias.

## **What skills does ALSA assess?**

ALSA consists of 31 tasks that assess basic (word-level) reading skills, such as letter identification, number identification, word identification, and word reading, and 13 tasks that assess higher literacy skills, such as text searching and inference. There also are 35 tasks related to background knowledge. Most of the basic reading tasks in ALSA, as well as a majority of the literacy tasks, involve documents rather than prose text.

## **What types of tasks, materials, and questions are used in ALSA?**

ALSA includes hands-on reading tasks that use familiar materials and visual aids—such as a food box with pictures and a logo—as well as oral reading tasks that rely on basic reading skills *without* the help of compensatory strategies. ALSA tasks cannot be performed solely on the basis of nonlinguistic materials; to perform the tasks, respondents must be able to read at least part of the word(s). ALSA tasks progress in difficulty from text that is minimal, highly contextualized, and familiar to text that is connected, less contextualized, and less familiar.

ALSA materials used in tasks include simple labels or signs, such as a beverage bottle, food box, or medicine bottle; medium-complexity materials, such as a magazine ad insert, sale flyer, or water bill; and more complex documents, such as a bus schedule or atlas. The following questions are similar, but not identical, to those asked of participants relating to basic reading and literacy skills:

- What letter is this?
- Please read this [number] for me.
- Please point to the word “water.”
- What does the label say people should do if they take too much of this?
- What kind of information does this section provide?
- Have you ever seen this before? [to determine participants’ background knowledge]

## **How are ALSA respondents selected, and what are their racial/ethnic and age characteristics?**

All NAAL respondents are given seven core screening tasks. Interviewers score respondents’ answers to these screening tasks using scoring guides printed in the ALSA booklets. ALSA participants are selected by computer, based on their performance on the seven core tasks, using an empirically derived algorithm that predicts very low performance on the main NAAL.

*For more information about NAAL and its components, visit the NAAL web site at <http://nces.ed.gov/naal> or contact Sheida White, NAAL Project Officer at the National Center for Education Statistics, by e-mail at [Sheida.White@ed.gov](mailto:Sheida.White@ed.gov).*