

Overview of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy

What is the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)?

NAAL is a nationally representative assessment of the English literacy skills of Americans age 16 and older. The [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES) has conducted assessments of U.S. adult literacy since 1985. The 2003 NAAL was the first assessment of the nation's progress in adult literacy since 1992. It provides information about the status and progress of literacy in the nation as a whole and among key population groups, including the nation's **least-literate adults**. The 2003 NAAL also provides the results of state-level assessments for six states that chose to participate in separate [state assessments](#)—Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, and Oklahoma—and an assessment of literacy among the nation's [prison population](#).

What does NAAL measure?

The “main NAAL” assessment, as distinct from the new NAAL components described below, measures how well Americans perform tasks with printed materials similar to those they encounter in their daily lives at work, at home, and in the community. Such tasks might include, for example, balancing a checkbook (**quantitative literacy**), filling out a job application (**document literacy**), or finding information in a news article (**prose literacy**). NAAL provides separate prose, document, and quantitative **literacy scores**. The 2003 NAAL also, for the first time, produces a health literacy score, provides previously unavailable information about the basic (word-level) literacy skills of the least-literate adults, and measures the English oral fluency of all respondents.

What are the new features of NAAL?

Fluency Addition to NAAL (FAN). [FAN](#) is an oral reading assessment that is completed by all NAAL participants. FAN uses speech-recognition software to assess the ability of adults to decode and recognize words and to read aloud with fluency. FAN tasks include oral reading of word lists and text passages. Oral directions and questions are provided in English or Spanish, as preferred by the participant. Words per minute and reading accuracy are recorded for analysis and scoring. Adult education providers can use this information to develop appropriate instruction and courseware for literacy and professional development training.

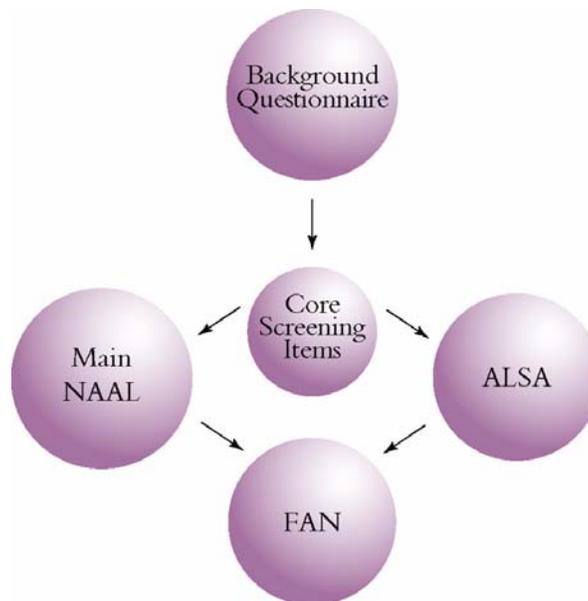
Adult Literacy Supplemental Assessment (ALSA). [ALSA](#) is completed only by participants with very low performance on seven **core screening questions**; these participants complete ALSA instead of the main NAAL assessment. ALSA assesses the ability of the least-literate adults to identify letters, numbers, and words—and to comprehend simple prose and documents with the aid of familiar, tangible materials (e.g., packaged food products) and nonlinguistic clues (e.g., pictures and logos). Oral directions and questions are provided in English or Spanish. ALSA also allows participants to answer in either language, although the material they attempt to read is in English. [Policymakers](#) and educators can use this previously unavailable information to create more effective programs to aid these individuals in such areas as employment, health, civic participation, and literacy.

Enhanced background questionnaire. The [2003 NAAL background questionnaire](#) collects information of interest to today’s policymakers and stakeholders that was not collected by the [1992 NALS background questionnaire](#). New questions relate, for example, to past and present participation in welfare; job-related training; use of technology; health-related conditions and activities; and literacy practices such as parents’ reading to their children. By tracking and reporting the literacy performance of adults by a range of demographic and other characteristics, NAAL supports a better understanding of the relationship of these factors to low literacy performance—and of the literacy needs of specific audiences. Policymakers can use this information to shape and target programs and services in response to demonstrated need; to provide improved literacy services that narrow the gap between low- and high-performing groups; to inform workplace literacy and job training programs; to enhance prison literacy programs; and to encourage further research on the factors associated with low literacy.

NAAL health literacy score. The [health literacy](#) score is derived from 28 health-related questions embedded in the main NAAL plus 10 health-related questions included in the enhanced background questionnaire. The health literacy score gauges the ability of adults to apply literacy skills to understand health-related materials and forms. Health organizations can use information about health literacy to identify target audiences for specific types of health information and to determine the literacy level at which materials for these audiences should be written.

What is the structure of the NAAL interview?

As shown below, when NAAL is administered, every participant receives a background questionnaire and the same core screening questions and FAN tasks. Very low performance on the core questions identifies ALSA participants. Adults performing above the ALSA cutoff score on the core items take the main NAAL. The entire [interview](#) takes an average of 90 minutes.



For more information about NAAL and its components, visit the NAAL website 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.