

Facts about adult literacy in Australia

Why do some Australians still have trouble with their reading and writing in the 21st century?

Literacy nowadays is a complex thing, and we need multiple literacies for different situations. Basic reading and writing skills are often not enough. We need strong digital literacy skills just to access government services or request sick leave from work. We need financial literacy to handle our tax and superannuation. We need health literacy. And we need information literacy to process the news, spot misinformation, and avoid scams.

Literacy and numeracy demands continue to increase, both for families and at work. Many people can manage their everyday literacy and numeracy needs quite happily, but don't feel confident with unfamiliar situations. Often people call the Hotline when they have been offered a promotion, or are worried because they need to complete some training at work. Their literacy skills have been good enough so far, but requirements are getting more and more complex.

Time pressures and family responsibilities also make it hard for adults to work on their literacy and numeracy, even though they would like to. They often feel embarrassed that they are not "up to scratch" in their writing and online skills. They may have had disrupted schooling due to health or family issues in the past. Learning may have been challenging for children of non-English speaking families in the past. Some adults may have a specific learning difficulty or dyslexia, and need an individualized approach.

How many adults have literacy gaps?

Around 44% of Australian adults have significant literacy gaps, which equates to more than 7 million people in total. Yet only 4,000 people contact the Hotline each year. This is most likely because they're either not aware of the service, or because they're too embarrassed to call. We know that our callers are just the tip of the iceberg, and that Australia's adult literacy, numeracy and digital education needs are not being well addressed.

Adult literacy is often overlooked in discussions of education in Australia. Many people assume that adult literacy is only for people from overseas, but the great majority of our callers are adults who were schooled in Australia.

The statistics above are from the 2013 OECD International survey, *Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC). Australia did not take part in the latest PIAAC survey in 2023. The Australian government is instead planning a survey of adult literacy in 2025, *Understanding Skills Across Australia*.

What's the difference between "language" and "literacy" in LLN?

In Australia, *literacy* usually means the ability to read and write in everyday life. *Language* usually means the ability to speak and understand English in everyday life. Some adults may **speak** English perfectly but have some literacy gaps, so they are not confident in reading, spelling or writing. The Hotline can advise on where to find help.

Many Australians were born overseas and some do not speak English as well as they would like. Many of them read and write perfectly in their first language, so they don't need help with reading and writing (**literacy**), they need help with English **language**. The Hotline usually suggests these people contact the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) to find an English language class.