

# Reading the Future

Planning to meet Canada's  
future literacy needs

## FACT SHEET

**Myth:** Canada does not have a literacy problem.

**Fact:** Almost half of all Canadian adults (48%) have low literacy skills.

**Myth:** Adult literacy in Canada will improve over time as more people acquire higher education.

**Fact:** The proportion of Canadian adults with low literacy skills will remain virtually unchanged through 2031.

### WHAT IS LITERACY?

Literacy today means much more than the ability to read and write. To succeed economically and socially, adults need the ability to analyze information, understand abstract ideas and acquire many other complex life skills.

### HOW CAN THERE BE A LITERACY PROBLEM IN CANADA, WHEN MOST ADULTS CAN READ AND WRITE?

Many people misinterpret *low literacy* as *illiteracy*. In reality, very few Canadian adults are truly illiterate (unable to read or write). The main concern is regarding the millions who possess some literacy skills, yet who are below the internationally accepted standard for coping in a modern society.

### WHAT IS READING THE FUTURE ABOUT?

*Reading the Future* is the first report of its kind in Canada. It provides new detailed estimates of Canadian adult literacy levels through 2031 and an unprecedented look—closer than ever before—at the “face” of low literacy. The report also outlines effective approaches to improve literacy among six identified groups. To complement the report, CCL has also developed **PALMM (Projections of Adult Literacy—Measuring Movement)**, an interactive online tool that allows visitors to calculate adult literacy rates into the future. To use this tool, visit [www.ccl-cca.ca/readingthefuture](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/readingthefuture).

### WILL THE LITERACY PROBLEM REMEDY ITSELF OVER TIME?

No. Despite the fact that more young adults are acquiring higher education, Canada's overall literacy levels are not expected to improve. In fact, the number of Canadians with low levels of literacy will increase significantly.

### THE FUTURE OF LITERACY IN CANADA

The following projections, for the period of 2001–2031, reflect population growth and demographic shifts:

- The proportion of adults with low literacy skills will remain virtually unchanged. As a result of population growth, Canada will see a 25% increase in the number of adults with low literacy skills, from almost 12 million to a total of 15,029,000 adults.
- The number of senior citizens (aged 66 and over) with low literacy skills will double to more than 6.2 million.
- The number of immigrants with higher literacy skills will increase from 1.8 million to 3.7 million—and the number of those with low-level literacy skills will increase by 61%, to a total of more than 5.7 million.
- The number of young adults (aged 16 to 25) with low literacy skills will remain almost the same.
- Although the number and proportion of adults in Canada with high literacy skills will also increase by 2031, this increase will not offset the predicted proportion or number of adults with low literacy skills.

## SNAPSHOT: THE “FACE” OF LOW LITERACY SKILLS IN CANADA

Almost half of all Canadian adults today face literacy challenges. The following findings are just a few highlighted in *Reading the Future*:

- Most believe that their skills are “adequate” for their work.
- Many have not completed high school, although some have pursued some post-secondary education and some may have university degrees.
- A large proportion is employed.
- Many have negative attitudes toward computers.
- Despite being below the international standard for functioning effectively in a modern society, most of these adults are relatively close to achieving that standard.

## WHY IS LOW LITERACY SUCH A CONCERN?

Low literacy has social and economic impacts for both the individual and our country.

On an individual level, for example, low literacy has been linked to poorer health outcomes: adults are ill more often, experience more workplace illnesses and accidents, take longer to recover, experience more mis-medications and die younger.

Conversely, adults with higher literacy skills work more, experience less unemployment, earn more, and rely less on government transfers.

On a national scale, adult literacy levels have been shown to have a profound influence on the growth or decline of a country’s economy.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE HOME LIVES AND ATTITUDES OF ADULTS WITH LOW LITERACY SKILLS?

To address the literacy problem in Canada, it is critical to understand who these adults are and why they may not be seeking help.

For example, *Reading the Future* states that many adults with low literacy skills dislike computers; with knowledge like this, policy-makers and adult educators can design literacy programs that meet specific learning needs and interests.

With more knowledge and tools available—such as *Reading the Future*—to help us understand the “who” and “why” of Canada’s literacy challenges, progress should be possible.

## WHO HAS LOW LITERACY SKILLS?

Men and women of all ages, cultural backgrounds and demographic groups face literacy challenges. They may be young adults or senior citizens; employed or unemployed; with or without children; and speak English, French or another mother tongue.

*Reading the Future* furthers our understanding of adults with low levels of literacy, categorizing them into groups and presenting a comprehensive overview of their similarities and differences. It then identifies effective approaches to improving the literacy skills of each of these groups.

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