

Understanding the Basic Reading Skills of U.S. Adults: Reading Components in the PIAAC Literacy Survey

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Recent results paint a troubling portrait of the literacy skills of U.S. adults. Equally troubling is that these skills have remained relatively unchanged when compared to results from previous years of U.S. adult surveys, while other countries have been showing improvement, especially among adults with low basic skills. Through a recent survey's deeper exploration of the most foundational component skills, we have richer information from which we can gain insights and draw implications for policy, as well as for learning and instruction for adults who score at the lowest levels of proficiency.

The ability to read fluently and for understanding – to be able to learn from text – is perhaps the most important foundational skill for U.S. adult citizens' health, well-being, and social and economic advancement. It is not only an essential skill when competing for jobs in the 21st century workforce, but is also a gateway to lifelong learning, education and training.

Reading components results help us to understand what adults with scores at or below Level 1 can and cannot do. Can they identify the meaning of high-frequency vocabulary words in print? Can they evaluate the meaning of single sentences? Can they read for local meaning in simple passages?

In this study, we describe **a) the reading component measures; b) results from four English and two non-English speaking countries who took the paper-based route of the PIAAC survey (including the reading components measures); and c) implications of those findings for policy and practice.**

- **General:** The U.S. below and at Level 1 groups consistently scored below the other English speaking countries in the sample, as well as below Spain and Italy. In most analyses, by Level 2, the U.S. results are comparable to other countries. Most adults at Level 3 were able to answer nearly all reading component items correctly.
- **Reading Components Rate:** With respect to time to complete the task sets, the U.S. was not disproportionately slower than the other countries in the sample. In general, differences in accuracy of performance are all reflected in speed or rate for completing task sets across the entire ability distribution. This suggests that fluency or automaticity of component skill processing is part of the underlying foundation of literacy for most adults.
- **Nonnative Speakers of the Test Language:** A significant proportion of the difference between the U.S. and the other countries in the six country sample could be attributed to the relatively poorer performance of the nonnative English speaking subgroup in the U.S. sample. The nonnative speakers in the U.S. sample generally performed lower than nonnative speakers in other countries in the sample. In general, nonnative speaker groups in countries scored lower than native speakers.
- **Native Speakers of Test Language only:** Comparing only native speaking adults across the sample, the U.S. results are comparable to the six country averages. This pattern still demonstrates weaknesses in reading component skills for at or below Level 1 U.S. adults (as well as in the other countries).