

# Understanding Literacy, How Adults Learn, and What This Means for SBCC Practitioners

Low literacy is a fact in many parts of the world. Millions of people live in oral and visual cultures where reading and writing are not essential features of daily life. Understanding how to reach low literate audiences with effective SBCC interventions and materials requires an understanding of literacy, principles of adult learning, and tested SBCC theories, models, and approaches.

This *C-Bulletin* provides an overview of these and assists SBCC practitioners to improve the way they address audiences with lower literacy skills toward the goal of helping these audiences to reflect critically about their own contexts, develop their knowledge and abilities, problem-solve, and take personal initiative and action toward change.

## What Is Literacy?

Literacy is generally defined as the ability to understand and communicate with simple written text in a person's first language. UNESCO's broader definition states that literacy enables individuals to develop their knowledge and abilities, achieve their goals, and participate fully in their communities and wider society. This definition goes beyond reading and writing and encompasses several types of literacy.

- *Health literacy*: Ability to gain access to, understand, and use information in ways that promote and maintain good health (WHO)
- *Information literacy*: Ability to recognize when information is needed to solve a problem and to locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information
- *Visual literacy*: Ability to interpret visual content and to communicate with others about this content
- *Media literacy*: Ability to analyze, understand, and develop information in various media formats
- *Technological literacy*: Ability to use digital information systems to increase learning, productivity, and performance

While all these types of literacy affect an individual's ability to understand and use information, the focus of *C-Bulletins* is a combination of general, health, and visual literacy.

## Which Theories and Models Underpin Literacy?

Various disciplines approach literacy from different perspectives. Social approaches understand low literacy as a product of inequalities and existing power relationships.

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*Some of the lowest literacy rates are found in sub-Saharan Africa, affecting approximately 38% of the adult population. In most of the region, there are stark differences in literacy rates between men and women and among different age groups, e.g., urban males have significantly higher literacy rates than older, rural women. (UNESCO 2010)*

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Socio-linguistic approaches see literacy as a set of social practices and symbol systems. For example, traffic signs in the United States use symbols in conjunction with small print language to explain rules and regulations. Bus schedules provide critical information in table formats. Websites require a certain level of language sophistication for successful navigation. Hence from the vantage point of this approach, to be fully literate is to be confident in interpreting these various forms of communication.

Germane to SBCC are education approaches that examine literacy from an adult learning perspective. This perspective forms the basis of C-Change's understanding of literacy for this series of *C-Bulletins*.

Adult learning theories recognize that individuals possess different learning styles, which if not addressed, can lead to weaknesses in literacy. Key principles of adult learning include:

- Adults want to take responsibility for their learning. They should be guided to discover knowledge, rather than being told facts.
- Adults need to connect their life experiences to learning. They learn best when asked to use and build upon their previous knowledge.
- Adults want to know how new knowledge relates to their current lives.
- Adults want their learning to help address or solve problems. The knowledge needs to be useful.

Adult learning theories also reveal that interactivity is key to helping adults with lower literacy skills learn. This fact takes on additional importance for SBCC practitioners. Materials need to balance the right amount of language and pictures used and provide adults opportunities to interact with information within their own context through dialogue, small group work, self-directed learning, learning-by-doing, problem solving, and reflection and collaboration on real-life situations.

## **What are the Consequences of Lower Literacy?**

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People with lower literacy skills tend to read one word at a time, often forgetting information in a previous sentence or paragraph. Poor readers tend to understand words or visuals literally and have difficulty applying what they have understood from a text or images to another context or setting. These result in a loss of meaning.

The table on the following page summarizes the differences between skilled and lower literacy readers. Understanding these and other issues are critical for the SBCC practitioner who must design appropriate and effective interventions and materials to reach these audiences.

In addition to limited reading and writing skills, lower literate audiences have difficulty in other literacy areas relevant to SBCC, e.g., media and political literacy. Media literacy requires an ability to deconstruct media messages and identify a “sponsor’s motives,” which can be confusing at best. Health messaging is particularly difficult for lower literate audiences because public health guidance and recommendations for action are heavily jargon-laden. An inability to decipher complex messaging can have consequences on a multitude of other health literacy components, such as access to information and use of services, informed consent, and adherence and negotiation skills for preventive action. Political literacy requires that individuals take personal initiative for change; however, people with literacy challenges tend to be less active participants when it comes to undertaking change initiatives.

### Differences Between Skilled Readers and Lower Literacy Readers

Skilled Readers	Lower Literacy Readers
Read with fluency	Read slowly
Understand meaning of words in context of text	May miss meaning of words in context of text
Able to determine meaning of unfamiliar words	May skip unfamiliar words
Do not need illustrations to understand meaning	Understand meaning better when photographic and graphic elements are included
Can understand abstract images against a monochrome background	Have difficulty understanding abstract images Are more likely to understand an image placed within its own context than one pasted against a monochrome background
Can read text presented in wide range of typographic styles	Can be distracted by wide range of typographic styles
Are comfortable reading long texts	Are uncomfortable reading long texts
Are able to easily produce texts themselves	Have difficulty producing texts themselves
Access texts in multiple media formats, including digital content	Access texts in limited media formats and may have less access to digital content

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### **Language Preference of Multilingual Audience: Zambia**

*In 2006, a survey in Zambia revealed that adults with at least a primary school education preferred health communication materials in English, while those without primary schooling preferred the materials in their mother tongues. (Underwood 2007)*

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## **How Do Second and Additional Languages Affect Literacy?**

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A person's first language is a strong influence on literacy, especially if it is the language in which they have learned to read. However, because many people have learned to read in a second (national) language in school, research has indicated that their less common mother tongue dictates the comfort they feel in reading and writing in a second language. People who did not attend school for very long are more likely to prefer materials in their first languages. Therefore, practitioners need to query audiences about their education levels and whether they have any written proficiency.

## **What are the Myths About Lower Literacy Audiences?**

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There is no reason why SBCC practitioners should avoid written texts for audiences with lower literacy, especially if the avoidance is based on the following myths and incorrect assumptions:

- People with lower literacy have low intelligence
- They cannot read at all
- They live in poverty
- They have poor verbal skills
- They did not complete primary school
- They cannot participate in concept testing or pretesting or in planning or implementing SBCC activities

Lower literacy readers can and do engage with texts. The extent to which they do this often depends on the way the text is presented and how well it takes into account their needs and preferences.

## What are Good Practices in Developing SBCC Materials for Lower Literacy Audiences?

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Much of what is deemed as good practice in developing SBCC materials and activities for general audiences is particularly important for audiences with lower literacy skills.

This starts with a deep understanding of the intended audience. *Audience segmentation* is key—dividing and organizing audiences into smaller groupings who have similar communication-related needs, preferences, and priorities and share characteristics such as age, gender, rural or urban lifestyle, and educational status.

Literacy levels should inform the text and images used in print materials, including the use of large-print materials with color pictures, and a host of other decisions—*concepts, visuals, and formats*.

There is *no one communication channel or material format that is most appropriate* for audiences with lower literacy skills. Instead, there is an increased need to understand and follow best practices when developing materials and activities for this audience, including consultation with them.

It is also important to consider *how and whether channels and formats that are selected complement and reinforce each other*. How will interactivity be built in to engage audiences with content? For example, how are print materials combined with interpersonal communication, such as small group discussions or community dramas?

After materials are drafted, *careful pretesting* will let SBCC practitioners know if the contents are relevant, understood, and appropriate for the intended audience. While this should be done with all audiences, it is especially important for audiences with lower literacy skills.

Finally, evaluating the reach, use, and effectiveness of the material or product and tracking geographic reach will help inform the SBCC practitioner about the impact of materials on the end-user and how well the distribution system is working.



## Notes

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## Communication Bulletins

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- 10 ADAPTING MATERIALS FOR AUDIENCES WITH LOWER LITERACY SKILLS

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of resources.



## Resources for More Information

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