Definition of “Everyday Literacy Tasks"

In the context of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), the term “everyday literacy tasks” refers to authentic literacy tasks that are encountered in the day-to-day lives of adults in the United States. Authenticity refers to preservation of literacy activities in their original form (unlike the tasks in international assessments, which must be shaped to suit participants from more than one nation.)

Everyday literacy tasks include tasks of varying difficulty associated with a range of adult roles and contexts. Thus they range widely in content and nature. Everyday literacy tasks typically involve instrumental goals such as retrieving specific information, following a set of directions, writing to share or record information, and transferring information from one source to another. Examples include reading classified ads in search of a job; completing a form at an employment center; looking at a bus schedule to determine the latest time the bus departs; reading a map to find the intersection of two roads; finding the latest times two people can leave their respective cities and arrive on time at the same meeting; reading a lunch menu to choose a meal with no cheese in it; and reading a newspaper article to keep in touch with current events.

Several characteristics generally distinguish adults’ everyday literacy activities, or tasks, from other literacy activities (e.g., school-based activities, or expert-level literacy activities such as a scientist reading a journal article or a novelist writing a book). First, everyday literacy activities tend to be common and familiar, but they also include less frequent yet important tasks such as completing a tax form, filing an insurance claim, writing a persuasive argument, evaluating a performance report, and completing a job application. Second, everyday literacy activities tend to be more structured and formulaic than expert-level activities, as indicated by the examples above. Finally, everyday literacy activities are often undertaken in service of a specific goal or interest (personal, professional, or social) and less often as ends in themselves.

These tasks can be differentiated from school-based tasks in that often the information needed to complete a task does not need to be learned and remembered, as is frequently the case in school settings. Additionally, unlike school-based tasks, everyday literacy tasks are not tied to a particular subject or curricular area.

The everyday literacy tasks measured by NAAL can also be distinguished by the purpose of the activities. Although adults as well as school-age children engage in reading to learn—increasingly so as society embraces the notion of lifelong learning—the NAAL everyday literacy tasks focus more on “reading to do” than on “reading to learn.” These tasks often require that adults *seek* specific, relevant information from one or more sources (e.g., maps, schedules, manuals, and other print materials). In addition, useful completion of everyday tasks often requires adults to infer meanings, compute numbers, and then *use* or *apply* that information to solve real problems as they confront them in daily life. Accordingly, the NAAL tasks probe adults’ facility in seeking specific,

relevant textual information and in interpreting and applying such information, as appropriate, within a range of real-world tasks.

Literacy skills, such as *text search*, *inference*, and *application*, complement basic reading skills. Adults with only basic reading skills, including many in the 2003 NAAL *Below Basic* level, may manage everyday tasks by relying on compensatory strategies or other people. Stronger literacy skills would afford them more flexibility and autonomy in carrying out such tasks and, therefore, a greater possibility of success in accomplishing their goals.

Domain-specific everyday literacy tasks

Vocabulary

Regardless of the type of literacy task, communicative clarity depends on command of the requisite vocabulary. For this reason, the Vocabulary Addition to NAAL is designed to probe participants' familiarity with words that characterize different types and levels of adult literacy materials. Reflecting a broad range of everyday literacy activities, the Vocabulary Addition will assess the following three levels of vocabulary knowledge:

- the basic set of English words that is used in virtually every type of written communication;

- the families of words needed to perform everyday tasks such as general work-based activities; locating information; making and communicating decisions regarding health, safety, financial, and consumer issues; and participating effectively in citizenship activities; and

- more advanced vocabulary meanings and usages necessary for understanding and producing more complex and sophisticated written materials.

Writing

Adults are frequently called upon to write in daily life, in the workplace, at home, and in the community. Examples of common functional writing tasks include the following:

- *workplace*—filling out a job application form; writing a memo to a supervisor; jotting down a telephone message; and preparing a resume;

- *home*—making a grocery list; writing an e-mail to a friend; and completing an online order form; and

- *community*—taking notes at a neighborhood meeting; writing an announcement for inclusion in a church bulletin; and writing a letter to the editor of a local newspaper.

The Functional Writing Addition to NAAL will assess adults' ability to perform such everyday writing tasks and will include not only pencil-and-paper tasks but also computer-based tasks.

Computer Literacy

National data show that the extent and pace of Americans' use of technology is growing, as is technology's impact on personal, economic, and social interests. Large-scale surveys of everyday computer use show that adults in the United States use computers for online activities, for e-mail, and to a lesser but growing extent, for instant messaging and activities associated with stand-alone applications such as word processing and spreadsheets. Reflecting these real-life uses of computer technologies, examples of everyday computer literacy tasks include the following:

- *web environment*—checking news and weather online; conducting searches to access and evaluate information regarding health and retirement issues; using e-commerce sites to gather information and make purchases; searching for new job opportunities; and downloading voter registration forms;

- *e-mail/instant messaging environment*—using e-mail or instant messaging to contact and share information with friends, family members, and coworkers; and

- *stand-alone application environment*—using a spreadsheet to track personal finances or create a record-keeping system for a DVD collection; using gaming software for recreation; and using a word-processing program to create a flyer for a community fund-raising event or to write a memo at work.

Document literacy