

# **Real-World Tasks Study of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy**

## **What is the NAAL Real-World Tasks Study?**

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) is conducting the Real-World Tasks Study to systematically identify the kinds of literacy-related reading, writing, and computer activities adults in the United States engage in routinely in their daily lives. The study will help ensure a high level of relevance for tasks developed for NAAL.

## **Why is this study needed?**

The NAAL definition of literacy emphasizes the ability to use written information encountered regularly in the workplace, at home, and in the community to *function* successfully in society. Therefore, NAAL assesses adult literacy using tasks and materials that simulate, to the extent possible, those encountered in daily activities.

Although literacy tasks have been the subject of substantial research, most previous studies focused on a narrow range of tasks—those encountered in school and other educational settings. There are limits, however, to what can be learned from school-based literacy tasks. For example, students who do well in school-based tasks may have difficulty applying their knowledge and skills to everyday literacy tasks. NAAL seeks to measure a broader set of skills that parallel those required to meet the literacy demands of daily life (e.g., searching for specific information in text and using the information to make a decision). The Real-World Tasks Study is needed to help ensure that NAAL tasks effectively cover the range of tasks and skills that adults encounter on a regular basis. The more realistic NAAL tasks are, the more helpful and relevant NAAL results will be to policymakers, practitioners, and others.

## **What does this study measure?**

The NAAL Real-World Tasks Study examines a variety of everyday literacy activities performed by a set of volunteer adults who are demographically similar to the adult population of the United States. Data are gathered on (1) the types of tasks that adults confront in various facets of daily life (e.g., prose, document, and quantitative); (2) the cognitive and linguistic skills required to perform these tasks (e.g., text search, inference, and application); (3) the kinds of prose and documents that confront America's adults in daily life (e.g., procedural text, poetry, forms, and maps); (4) the range of topics in the written materials adults routinely encounter (e.g., health-related, job-related, and leisure activities); (5) the proportion of time adults spend on various literacy activities and the frequency with which literacy tasks are performed; (6) the forms of materials adults read (e.g., books, periodicals, mail, and online news and information) and (7) whether or not calculations are performed during the literacy activities.

## **What are the benefits of the NAAL Real-World Tasks Study?**

The results of this study—information about the nature and frequency of literacy tasks performed by U.S. adults in their daily lives at home, in the workplace, and in the community—will provide the following benefits: (1) contribute importantly to the development of new literacy tasks as NAAL expands into the areas of vocabulary, functional writing, and computer literacy; (2) validate the 2003 NAAL tasks and support the relevance of NAAL tasks to be developed in the future; and (3) validate the patterns of literacy activities reported by NAAL participants in 2003.

Data from this study can also benefit policymakers, educators, literacy practitioners, and researchers by helping them target resources and develop materials to best help adults improve their literacy performance and function more effectively in daily life.

### **Study plan**

The first phase of this study will be to develop a conceptual plan for carrying out the planned study activities. The Real-World Tasks Study will use volunteer participants for data collection who are demographically similar to the general U.S. population. The participants will complete diaries to provide information about the literacy activities they engage in as part of their daily lives. They will record all of their reading, writing, and computer activities on each of 2 assigned days. These 2 days will be a mix of working and nonworking days, to effectively capture the range of reading, writing, and computer tasks that adults engage in.

During the data collection phase of the study, participants will record details such as the following about reported reading, writing, and computer tasks: task description; time spent on the task; task purpose; form of materials read and/or written; volume of material written; media used; general types of cognitive and linguistic skills required for the task; whether the task involved calculations; and whether the task was job related.

In the early analysis phase of the study, coders will use the collected data to document task characteristics identified by the NAAL framework, including the task type (prose, document, hybrid, or quantitative); the general form of the materials read; the specific kinds of prose and/or documents used; and the general topic.

Finally, descriptive analyses will identify similarities and differences between tasks participants recorded in the Real-World Tasks Study and tasks included in the 2003 NAAL. These identified similarities and differences will serve as a guide for further NAAL task development as needed. Additional qualitative analyses will help researchers understand and develop or validate taxonomies for the kinds of writing and computer tasks adults engage in.

*For more information about NAAL and its components, visit the NAAL website at <http://nces.ed.gov/naal> or contact Sheida White, NAAL Project Officer at the National Center for Education Statistics, by e-mail at [Sheida.White@ed.gov](mailto:Sheida.White@ed.gov).*

