

Frequently Asked Questions about Literacy and Tutoring



...Serving Northern Illinois

What is literacy?

Almost everyone can read something, or at least identify sign and symbol. However, many adults have low literacy skills. One current definition of literacy reads, “using printed material and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” Literacy skills occur on a continuum; we cannot merely divide people into two groups, that of the literate and illiterate. Rather, it is distressing to note that in the United States, 93 million adults can perform only simple literacy activities, not complex ones. Most adults seeking the services of The Literacy Council are functioning in society. They hold jobs, own homes, have families, and participate in community life. The major difference is that low-literacy adults do not use printed material as a resource for learning. Much of the information they receive is from TV or radio.

Low literacy costs an estimated 225 billion annually in the form of non-productivity, crime, and loss of tax revenue. American Management Association studies reveal that more than 40 percent of job applicants in 2000 lacked the literacy and numeric skills required to perform the job for which he or she applied. National Association of Manufacturing member companies reject one-third of job applicants for inadequate reading or writing skills.

Who are the people The Literacy Council serves?

The Literacy Council was founded in 1985 to meet the need for adult literacy services in Boone, Winnebago, and northeast Ogle counties. The State Adult Literacy Survey estimates that more than 43,000 adults in the Council’s service area read below a 4th grade level, and over 100,000 read below an 8th grade level.

Why didn’t these adults learn to read in school?

Everyone reads a little. The reasons some people have difficulty reading are as varied as the adult learners themselves. The following factors may have interfered with the learners’ ability to attend school: physical illness, families relocating often, or a personal tragedy. For some, when the fundamentals of reading were taught in school, the student’s learning was disrupted. Others may not have been ready to learn when reading was taught to them, while still others were not able to learn using the methods taught in the classroom. A child who is a struggling reader who receives no intervention may continue to be a struggling reader throughout his or her school career and into adulthood. At the Literacy Council, we do not focus on why someone did not learn to read well, but on what we can do to help that person improve his or her reading now.

How can a person become an adult learner at The Literacy Council?

A simple phone call to 815-963-READ (7323) is the first step in becoming an adult learner at The Literacy Council. A staff member will schedule an appointment to meet with the adult learner. Once we know the adult learner’s reading needs, he or she can be matched with a tutor who can help.

How does someone become a volunteer tutor at The Literacy Council?

In addition to having good reading skills, volunteers must meet the following requirements:

- Have a high school diploma or equivalent.
- Be able to recognize and pronounce individual sounds in words.
- Complete a 16-hour New Tutor Workshop.

In the New Tutor Workshop, volunteers learn the techniques and materials used to teach reading and writing to adults with limited literacy skills. They are matched with an adult learner as soon as the workshop is completed. Our learning-pairs continue to work with each other, if they are willing, until the adult learner has met his or her goals, such as enrolling in a GED course or reading a bedtime story to children. And The Literacy Council's ongoing support ensures that the tutoring experience is enjoyable and successful!

What time commitment is request of a volunteer tutor?

After completing the New Tutor Workshop, we recommend that tutors meet with their adult learners for two one-hour sessions a week. We have found that progress is faster and more consistent at this level of frequency.

Where do adult learners and tutors meet?

In addition to The Literacy Council tutoring site on North Main St. in Rockford, the Council has staffed satellite sites in Belvidere and Loves Park. Tutoring takes place at over 25 public sites, including churches, community centers, and library branches. We place an adult learner and tutor at a site convenient to both, if possible.

What methods and materials are used to help adult learners improve their skills?

Phonics is the basic method The Literacy Council uses to teach reading. Research across the country and our own experience has convinced us that an understanding of letters and the sounds they make is crucial in learning to read well. Since its beginning, the Council has focused on a multisensory, phonics-first approach to teaching reading. Multisensory means using the senses to transmit information to the brain. Each tutoring session includes the use of five senses: visual (sight), verbal (speech), auditory (hearing), kinesthetic (movement), and tactile (touch). The Literacy Council supports two separate reading programs: the international program called "Laubach Way to Reading" as well as the "Teaching Reading to Adults" program developed by Council staff.

How is The Literacy Council funded?

The Literacy Council is supported by the Illinois Secretary of State, the Illinois Community College Board, United Way of Rock River Valley, United Way of Boone County, private contributors, and all who participate in the annual "100 Men Who Cook" fundraiser.